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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Unsettled Frontier: Historical Imagination and Asynchronous Belonging on the Amur River

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Abstract

This article explores the peculiarity of struggles over memory in Soviet-era planned cities in the Russian Far East. It focuses on the contested history of Permskoe, a village founded by peasant settlers from European Russia in 1860, which was later subsumed by Komsomolsk-na-Amure, an urban industrial center constructed in the Stalinist period in the 1930s. Built with the participation of Young Communist League volunteers recruited from across the Soviet Union, the city was held up as a symbol of the triumph of socialist modernization throughout the twentieth century. But following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, the city suffered a dramatic reversal of fortunes, with a massive outflow of residents and resources leading to an economic crisis that also occasioned a crisis of identity. One manifestation of this crisis is an initiative seeking to recalculate the city's age based on the date of Permskoe's founding. This proposal has been denounced by many residents as an attempt to erase the city's Soviet history and to downplay the role of communist volunteers in the city's construction. Drawing on the debates which erupted around this periodization controversy, I argue that the collapse of the Soviet imaginary of linear progress and inability to articulate a new frontier myth resulted in "asynchronous belonging," characterized by radical polarization around memory and irreconcilable allegiances to different moments in local history.

Keywords: memory; deindustrialization; urbanism; frontiers; post-socialism; historical imagination; polarization; nationalism; Russian Far East

Introduction

On 18 December 1932, the Khabarovsk-based newspaper *Tikhookeanskaia Zvezda* ran a short story celebrating the emergence of a new Soviet urban center. This newborn city on the eastern edge of the USSR's map was Komsomolsk-na-Amure —a military-industrial giant whose construction had begun only a few months earlier on the site of a remote nineteenth-century peasant settlement known as Permskoe. Published under the subtitle, "Permskoe is no more, now it's Komsomolsk," the report cited a decree by the Presidium of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the

Russian Soviet Socialist Republic that resolved to "transform" village Permskoe into the city of Komsomolsk-na-Amure. Ironically, more than eight decades later, the language of this perfunctory bureaucratic document would inadvertently provide the basis for a popular questioning of the new reality promulgated by the article's triumphant subtitle. In the post-Soviet era, the origins and history of Komsomolsk, one of the Soviet Union's most iconic internationalist projects, became the object of a fierce polemic between defenders of the city's socialist identity and those seeking to reinstate Permskoe's "rightful place" as the city's forebear. The latter camp used the fact that official documents spoke of the "transformation" of the village, rather than its dissolution, to start a public campaign for the recalculation of the city's age, backdating it to the year of Permskoe's founding.

In 2015, local journalist Anton Ermakov submitted an official petition to the City Duma requesting to make changes to the City Charter which would recognize 18 August 1860—the date of Permskoe's founding—as Komsomolsk's official birthday. Largely directed at popularizing local history, this initiative proved highly controversial with the public and drew a stream of accusations that the petition represented an attempt to "rewrite" the city's history, erase its Soviet identity and trivialize the heroic efforts of the city's builders. Embedded within this seemingly innocuous and narrow historiographic debate around periodization were a whole series of deep, unresolved tensions surrounding the mythologized narratives of Komsomolsk's founding, the legacies of Soviet industrialization, traumatic memories of the Soviet Union's collapse, and conflicting visions of Komsomolsk's future. Named after the Young Communist volunteers, who traveled from all over the USSR to take part in the construction of this socialist city in the taiga, Komsomolsk was hailed in the Soviet press as a symbol of the triumph of internationalism. Yet, following the collapse of the Soviet state and the centrally planned economy of which the city's industrial enterprises were an integral part, Komsomolsk experienced massive demographic and infrastructural decline. The still-ongoing process of restructuring the city's economy and renegotiating its place in the Russian national state that succeeded the USSR has been accompanied by rapid fragmentation of historical and social memory and a pluralization of narratives about the origin, identity, and purpose of this frontier settlement.

In this article, I draw on the debates surrounding the controversy over Komsomolsk's origin date to analyze the historiographic processes that underpin the formation of collective identity and historical imagination in Russia's easternmost frontier. My argument is twofold. First, through an analysis of Soviet-era representations, I demonstrate that the vision of Permskoe as Komsomolsk's "antagonist" and the view that memory of the village is a potential threat to the city's socialist mythos is a largely post-Soviet invention. Second, I argue that the bitter debates around the city's founding moment that have unfolded since the 1990s reflect a failure to articulate a new orienting mythos that would give meaning to the still-incomplete project of nation-building in the Russian Far East. The collapse of the Soviet industrial project, whose economic and security logics were the *raison d'etre* of this remote manufacturing center, has materialized in a particular regime of historicity that I label "asynchronous belonging." The term takes its inspiration from the German philosopher Ernst Bloch and his concept of "non-simultaneity," which he elaborated in his seminal 1935 book, *The Heritage of Our Times* (1991[1935]). There, Bloch focuses on the sense of temporal disjuncture generated by uneven modernization, which enabled the persistence of modes of being and thinking inherited from the pre-capitalist past in a rapidly industrializing Germany.

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In this article, by contrast, I explore the "nonsynchronous contradictions" that continue to emanate from the wreckage of a failed socialist project, which aspired to transcend capitalist society. In Soviet-era frontier cities, the over-half-a-century-long experiment of socialist modernity left behind an entangled urban infrastructure specifically designed to function as part of a centrally planned economy and, as such, ill-equipped for the political-economic transition. This material legacy, coupled with entrenched social expectations of welfare support and state-driven modernization, make it hard to articulate a vision for "post-socialist development" that would be regarded by local residents as an acceptable substitute for the imagined future they lost after the collapse of the USSR. This absence of a shared political project for the future leads to a clustering of historical imaginations around distinct projects from the past, with different social groups developing emotional identification and a sense of lineage with divergent moments in local history (all of which embody once-existing, but no-longer-viable, visions of the frontier). Following Hirsch and Stewart, I understand "historicity" as "a complex and performative condition" and as "the manner in which persons operating under the constraints of social ideologies make sense of the past, while anticipating the future" (2006: 262). The specificity of "asynchronous belonging" lies in the intense politicization of historicity and conscious antagonism between distinct temporalities that previously co-existed within a hierarchical, but also complimentary, relationship.

The curation of "founding moments" has long been a central aspect of nationalist mythmaking (Çinar and Taş 2017; Ellis 2000; Spillman 1997), with "the problem of beginnings" (Said 1975) haunting not only modern nation-states but also their iconic cities (Bérubé 2002; Çinar 2001; Freeman 2010). Much like the constructed histories of nations that rely on selective amnesias (Anderson 1983), invented traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), or "usable pasts" (Gellner 1983), commemoration of cities and debates over what constitutes their "founding moments" is densely linked to the community's ongoing attempts to elaborate its own identity (Bérubé 2002; Freeman 2010; Portnov and Portnova 2015). The latter process is particularly true of cities imagined to be "the cradle of the nation," or those which solidify the link between the nation and its territory. In this context, the choice of a city's founding moment presupposes an answer to the question of when a given community acquired its defining characteristics, which are envisioned to extend in time and to shape the present and future of its descendants (Pierre-Yves Saunier cited in Bérubé 2002). In his exploration of the post-socialist transformation of Priargunsk in Eastern Transbaikalia, Ivan Peshkov (2014) describes how the collapse of "frontier socialism," characterized by a strong connection between industrialization and militarization of the borderlands, produced both resignification of material traces of the Soviet state, from symbols of modernity to "ruinized" objects of nostalgia, and depoliticization of the local past, previously haunted by the specter of the Civil War, kept alive by White émigrés descended from Cossack communities on the Chinese side of the border. This paper contributes to the discussion of re-imagining frontier pasts and futures after socialism through an analysis of a case where an imperial past, mostly regarded as unproblematic during the Soviet era, became an object of active politicization and contestation in the 1990s. By shifting attention to locales and communities, where attempts to de-center and redefine the Soviet past continue to face active resistance and generate lasting social frictions, I seek to problematize the idea of a "White-Red" fusion as a source of societal cohesion and new nationalist consensus in post-Soviet Russia (Fedor 2013; Laruelle 2009; 2016; Laruelle and Karnysheva 2020).

Standing more than seventy years apart, both Permskoe and Komsomolsk are products of distinct moments in history, which separately embody times when the Amur region was conceived as a repository of hopes and national aspirations as well as a site of rapid development. After the incorporation of the Maritime region into the Russian Empire as a result of the 1858 Aigun Treaty between the Russian and Qing empires, the Amur region became a destination for population resettlement. In the course of this process, a chain of villages was established along the Amur River with the goal of facilitating shipping and navigation through the creation of settlements where ships could stop to recharge their supplies of food and fuel. Permskoe was founded in 1860 by peasants who hailed mostly from Russia's Perm province, just west of the Ural Mountains, as the name suggests. This phase of active development was part of a broader phenomenon that Mark Bassin (1999: 3) aptly labeled "Amur Euphoria"—a surge of fascination with this frontier region and its potential, which gripped the minds of Russia's intellectual and cultural elites in the mid-nineteenth century. This popular enthusiasm proved to be short-lived and rapidly evaporated once it became clear that the Amur basin's terrain and climate made it unsuitable for large-scale agriculture or transformation into a major transportation artery (ibid.). This realization plunged the region back into obscurity and neglect (ibid.). Not until the 1930s, amidst the growing military threat from Japan, did the region once again became a zone of active interest, this time for Soviet authorities who launched an expedited industrialization campaign in hopes that a local military-industrial complex would deter, or at least stall, an impending Japanese invasion.

The construction of Komsomolsk began in May 1932. When the first building brigades disembarked on the shores of the Amur, Permskoe was home to about 360 residents and consisted of just one street stretched along the riverbank, flanked by forty-seven wooden houses and a Nanai settlement known as Dzemgi to the east. As construction progressed, a few Permskoe residents chose to stay and participate in the creation of the new city, but the majority accepted modest compensation from the Soviet state and established a new village further north. Many of the village's original buildings were disassembled and transported downriver on the request of their owners, who preferred to relocate with their property rather than adjust to urban life. Originally envisioned as a secondary shipyard built in an inconspicuous location, Komsomolsk evolved into the region's largest military-industrial base, featuring shipbuilding, aircraft, and metallurgical industries. Between 1932 and 1934, more than six thousand Komsomol members from different parts of the USSR participated in the city's construction, an episode that would define the Soviet mythos of Komsomolsk as "the city at dawn," built by fervent young communists, collectively known as *pervostroiteli*, or "first-builders."

The first Komsomol brigades proved utterly unprepared for the harsh conditions of the site. Plagued by a lack of adequate shelter and provisions, their ranks declined swiftly due to death from disease and episodes of mass desertion, which forced Soviet authorities to resort to the use of prison labor (Bone 1999). During the key building years, about ninety thousand Gulag prisoners labored in Komsomolsk, mainly in timber procurement, excavation, and masonry work, a history that for many decades was excluded from the city's official historiography. Throughout the Soviet era, Komsomolsk enjoyed high levels of publicity in the All-Union press, with its "first-builders" glorified in films, books, and theater plays, including Sergei Gerasimov's 1938 film *Komsomolsk* and Vera Ketlinskaia's novel *Fortitude*, published in the same year and later adapted for screen. These cultural productions were part of a propaganda

campaign that disseminated romanticized visions of the Far East as an exotic land full of adventure and discovery, with the goal of incentivizing migration to this sparsely populated and underdeveloped region (Shulman 2007; Widdis 2000).

Today's proponents of Permskoe memorialization are often quick to ascribe public hostility to their initiatives to the lasting effects of this decades-long Soviet propaganda, which they argue cultivated the mythology of Komsomol pioneers, while systematically erasing the memory of Permskoe's existence. Such a rendition of Far Eastern history is not only simplistic but patently inaccurate. As I will demonstrate, the memory of Permskoe and the region's imperial-era colonization in fact occupied a substantial place in Soviet-era historiography and was incorporated alongside the city's socialist mythos to produce a sense of belonging among Soviet workers who relocated to this remote site. The radical polarization of the local community around memory was precipitated by the dramatic transformation of the city's social and economic realities after the collapse of the USSR. In the 1990s, Komsomolsk's industrial production decreased by 90 percent, which triggered prolonged strikes and protests (Evans 2015). Although the social turmoil had begun to subside by the early 2000s, after concerted efforts by federal authorities to prevent the shutdown of the city's key industries via authorization of new defense orders, the prospects for Komsomolsk's future remained grim, and it continued to be plagued by massive outmigration and decaying infrastructures.

Soviet-Era Mythmaking and the Production of Belonging

Heavily skewed towards documenting the monumental feat of erecting a modernist city in the depths of an inhospitable landscape, the Soviet-era historiography of Komsomolsk rarely centered the history of Permskoe village. Nevertheless, it did not explicitly seek to obliterate memory of the village either. Instead, Permskoe and the Dzemgi settlement bordering it were treated as organic parts of the new city's history. The numerous chronicles documenting the city's founding paid a great deal of attention to interactions between Permskoe residents and Komsomol members, depicting their incessant and joint struggle with an unforgiving nature and the ways in which seasoned "old-timers" helped new arrivals to adjust and survive in the unfamiliar climate. Such examples include Aleksander Grachev's 1965 novel, *The First Glade*, and Gennadii Khlebnikov and Efim Dorodnov's 1967 book, *The Feat on the Amur*. The attitude towards Permskoe and the region's pre-Soviet history before Komsomolsk's creation was, at times, ambiguous. With the city's mythos so firmly rooted in the idea of "novelty" and "originality," some narratives did emphasize that Soviet development differed radically both from the region's imperial-era colonization and comparable European projects. At the same time, tropes of "discovery" and "domestication" from the era of European colonial exploits often informed the discourses of the Soviet Far East's development. Alongside the Arctic, the region was presented as the Soviet Union's own "empty" frontier, whose subjugation would transform not only its vast territories but also the young socialist society (Widdis 2000).[1] In a 1972-article entitled "The Day When the City's History Began," published in the city's major newspaper *Dalnevostochnyi Komsomolsk* and authored by a

[1]Explicit comparisons with the settlement of America were equally prominent in nineteenth-century representations of the region, with the Amur River being compared to the Mississippi (Bassin 1999).

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first-builder, Komsomolsk's founders are referred to as "the Columbuses of a new, Soviet era."[2] These first-builders were destined to create "the outpost of socialism in the Far East" and to "open the window [*prorubit' okno*] to the industrialization of the limitless spaces of North-Eastern Asia." The author explicitly juxtaposes the selflessness and conscious sacrifice of Komsomol members to the profit-seeking motives of Alaska's American settlers:

> To the remote edges of the country, the godforsaken Amur taiga, where the foot of a man barely stepped and where nature and the people were fated to face each other in a long battle, the young generation of Leninists were driven not by "gold fever" or "worship of the golden devil," as it was the case in Alaska's recent past, where American adventurers and money-grubbers poured from all over the country. Komsomol volunteers were driven to the Far East by a high, noble purpose—to honestly and selflessly serve the people … and to leave their descendants new factories and cities, a wonderful territory warmed and transformed by labor.[3]

Despite evident tensions, the memory of Permskoe was readily incorporated into local historiography during the city's early decades. The first exhibition of the Museum of Regional Studies, created in 1947, was divided into four parts and opened with a section that reconstructed everyday life in Permskoe prior to 1932. The second section documented the village's transformation into the region's major industrial center, while the remaining two were dedicated to Komsomolsk's manufacturing achievements and perspectives for the city's future development.[4] By establishing an implicit hierarchy between Permskoe and Komsomolsk, the temporal sequencing of the exhibition successfully integrated the site's pre-Soviet past into a linear narrative of progress, embodied by the spectacular transformation of a remote and "forsaken" village into a proud modern city. It is also significant that the Museum's curators chose Permskoe, rather than the nearby Dzemgi settlement which existed long before the arrival of Russian migrants, as a starting point for narrating Komsomolsk's origin story. This choice was hardly accidental. The territorial anxieties associated with the turbulent history of the Amur region—that is, its relatively late inclusion in the Russian Empire in 1858 and its late incorporation into the Soviet Union in 1922, which was preceded by foreign intervention and a short-lived independent Far Eastern Republic—ensured sustained attention to the region's Russian, pre-Soviet history in the Soviet press and popular culture. This strategic need for "deep history" resulted in parallel, but occasionally overlapping cultures of memory in iconic planned cities like Komsomolsk: one emphasizing the *longue durée* history of Russian colonization and the other rooted in the mythology of a "radical break" and "the new era" embodied by the Soviet pioneer builders.

The post-World War II era witnessed a resurgence of interest in the history of the Amur region's imperial-era development, which was partly prompted by the proliferation of historical novels that focused on the exploration and settlement of

[2]The metaphor also references one of the river steamers named after Christopher Columbus, which brought the first dispatch of Komsomol members to the site in 1932.

[3]Mikhail Il'in, "Den', s Kotorogo Nachinaetsia Istoriia Nashego Goroda," *Dalnevostochnyi Komsomolsk*, 12 May 1972.

[4]"Kraievedcheskii Muzei v Komsomol'ske," *Tikhookeanskaia Zvezda*, 30 Nov. 1947.

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"new lands" in the Far North and Far East. Leon Twarog characterizes such works as a subgenre of what he labels "the genealogy of the centralized state"—fictionalized historical novels aimed at "documentation of the process which resulted in the great and powerful Russia of today" (1960: 562). Soviet historical novels subverted imperial-era accounts of the region's incorporation, which often highlighted decisions by state officials, and instead foregrounded the feats and achievements of ordinary Russians, especially land and sea explorers (Gasiorowska 1954). These fictionalized accounts often represent Russian settlers as "carriers of enlightenment" and "protectors of indigenous people" from the "predatory" intentions of rival foreign powers—China, Japan, and America (Slezkine 2016: 325–26). These narratives were also sometimes echoed in accounts that dealt with the Soviet development of Far Eastern and northern territories, which portrayed the Bolsheviks as "successors" of the first explorers like Ermak and Poiarkov, who were recovering "historically Russian lands" (Azhaiev cited in ibid.: 238).

Perhaps the most famous literary work of the time dealing with the history of Russia's expansion in the Amur region was Nikolai Zadornov's *Amur-Saga* (*Amur-Batiushka*), which chronicled the lives of peasant settlers in Permskoe in the 1860s and 1870s. Zadornov finished the first part of the trilogy between 1939 and 1940 in Komsomolsk, where he had arrived just two years earlier. Combining journalistic work with his position as head of the local theater's literature department, Zadornov actively traveled across the region, visiting remote villages and documenting the lives and histories of indigenous people, as well as those of descendants of Russian settlers. In the foreword to the 1987 reprint of the book, he reminisced about his interest in the region's pre-Soviet past, which was sparked by his encounters with material traces of Permskoe in the still-growing, young city: "We all began the story with the first day of Komsomolsk, when the construction began. Yet, along the Amur banks there were still arable lands, twenty-six houses with glass-covered terraces, with five or seven windows, quite spacious, under the roofs made of galvanized corrugated iron. These were obviously the remnants of an old settlement" (2023[1987]: 7).

Mindful of Zadornov's passion for local history, his colleagues from the *Stalinskii Komsomolsk*[5] newspaper who were working on a book about the city's first-builders invited the amateur ethnographer to write a short essay about Permskoe—"the ancestor of the newly born city" (ibid.: 9). The essay evolved into a multi-year research project for the novel which, Zadornov claimed, sought to subvert stereotypical depictions of peasant life as filled with misery and subjugation. Instead, the book aimed to highlight the active role of the Russian peasantry in national history by depicting the heroic aspects of the settlers' more than two-year-long journey from Perm to the Amur's undomesticated shores, as well as the astuteness and relentlessness they demonstrated in their struggles with nature (ibid.: 8).

In stark contrast to socialist realist novels dedicated to Komsomolsk's construction, which celebrate the heroism and decisiveness of its almost superhuman protagonists, Zadornov's slow-paced and at times ethnographically descriptive epic bears closer resemblance to the nineteenth-century literary and documentary accounts of the Amur. Deeply attentive to the details of Siberian peasants' material culture and everyday struggles, the novel foregrounds the human cost of developing the region as well as the emancipatory potential of life on the Amur, far removed from the

[5]The newspaper was renamed *Dalnevostochnyi Komsomolsk* (Far Eastern Komsomolsk) in 1956.

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scrutinizing gaze of state officials. Completed between 1939 and 1946, the *Amur-Saga* became highly popular and was awarded The Stalin Prize for Literature in 1952.[6] While few other novels dealing with the region's history managed to replicate Zadornov's success, the topic continued to attract interest among Far Eastern writers in the coming decades. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, a series of writings appeared that documented the lives and tribulations of imperial-era explorers and settlers in the Russian Far East. These included the Nanai writer Grigorii Khodzher's trilogy *The Broad Amur* (1970–1971), Nikolai Navolochkin's *Miles of the Amur* (1974), Ivan Basargin's *In Tigers' Mountains* (1975), and Anatolii Maksimov's *Russian Trails* (1979).

Paralleling this proliferation of fictionalized accounts, the history and fates of Permskoe's residents became an increasingly popular subject among local historians and journalists after the 1950s. In 1956, *Stalinskii Komsomolsk* published an extended report, "The Residents of Permskoe Village," which traced the biographies of some of the village's former residents and highlighted their contributions to communal industrialization. Prefaced with the observation that the newspaper frequently received letters from readers enquiring about the fates of Permskoe residents, the article proceeded to tell the story of Ivan Bormotov, a Permskoe native born in 1900, who chose to stay in Komsomolsk and eventually became chief of the local sawmill. Head of a large household, Bormotov observed that only four of his children could be accurately described as "born in Permskoe," since the rest were born in Komsomolsk. "But, as you know, this does not change geography," he is quoted saying, as he muses over the temporal-geographic paradox of the village's transformation. Other protagonists of the article are Bormotov's numerous relatives, most of whom also stayed in the city, working for electric, forestry, and building industries, and Matvei Varfolomeev—the only Nanai resident of Dzemgi settlement who remained in Komsomolsk with his family. The recognition of peasant contributions to regional development was also occasionally accompanied by acknowledgment of the critical role played by tsarist state officials. Thus, in 1960, *Dalnevostochnyi Komsomolsk* published a piece commemorating the centennial anniversary of Permskoe's founding authored by Boris Polevoi, a renowned publicist and regional studies specialist.[7] The article recounts the historical processes and government decisions that led to the creation of Permskoe in 1860. It includes excerpts from memoirs of travelers who visited the village during the first decade of its existence, many of whom noted its disadvantageous location for agriculture while expressing skepticism about the new settlement's future. Polevoi (1960: 4) concludes by praising Komsomolsk's builders, whose "glorious efforts" disproved pessimistic prognoses and created "a wonderful city, which laid the foundation of a new life," one which even those who wholeheartedly believed in the region's potential could not have dreamed of.

The return of Permskoe memory in the 1950s and 1960s was part of the broader trend of popularization of *kraievedenie*, or local history and regional studies, in the post-Stalin period. As Victoria Donovan (2015) argues, during the Khrushchev era, *kraievedenie* emerged as an effective tool of mobilizing popular patriotism and countering a sense of anomie in postwar society through promotion of interest in locally rooted histories and heritage among Soviet citizens. Although official policies

[6]The prize was awarded to Zadornov for three novels—*Amur Saga* (1940–1946), *Faraway Land* (1946), and *To the Ocean* (1949).

[7]Boris Polevoi, "Eto Bylo Vek Nazad (K Stoletiiu Osnovaniia Sela Permskogo)," *Dalnevostochnyi Komsomolsk*, 19 July 1960.

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explicitly aimed to foreground the recent Soviet, rather than the Russian national past (ibid.: 466), the popular revival of regional studies was paralleled by a surge of interest in Russian cultural identity and traditions, especially among conservative writers. Echoing official discourses that portrayed Soviet society as "grappling with the decline of its communal ethos," conservative intellectuals offered their own diagnosis of social malaise allegedly driven by disconnectedness from Russian *national* history (ibid.). The official promotion of regional studies involved publishing books on local history, sponsoring museum exhibitions, and encouraging young people to participate in archeological research, historical preservation work, and nature tourism. These activities, coupled with the institutionalization of secularized versions of folk festivals and popularization of a village prose genre, which bemoaned the destructive effects of modernity on the rural social world, inevitably resulted in growing popular interest in pre-Soviet history and Russian peasant culture (Luehrmann 2013: 548).

While the Khruschev-era turn towards regional history certainly played an important role in stimulating and legitimizing interest in Komsomolsk's pre-Soviet past, the local search for "deep history" was already manifest in the Stalin period and clearly preceded the revival of regional studies in the 1950s. I would suggest that this phenomenon is best understood through the prism of the specific geopolitical and social challenges that confronted the sparsely populated Far Eastern frontier. The tenuous nature of the Soviet presence in the region prompted authorities to actively engage in the production of historical myths that would reassert the region's Russian history, while cultivating a sense of belonging to a new homeland for workers relocating to the borderlands. The accelerated industrialization of the region in the 1930s and special attention attached to the Far East in popular culture were, in many ways, conditioned by open acknowledgment of the region's vulnerability and anticipation of a looming war with Japan. As Elena Shulman (2007) observes, realization of the region's strategic significance was as critical as the narrative of transforming "exotic wilderness" into a socialist "promised land" for instilling Soviet migrants with a sense of the special urgency of their mission. Yulia Mikhailova (2008) makes a similar argument and suggests that Japan's resurgent militarism and occupation of Manchuria generated renewed focus in Soviet public culture on establishing connections between people moving to the Far Eastern territories and the land they were expected to defend. She compares Soviet representations of Japan with those produced during the 1905 Russo-Japanese war, and notes that maps and other types of visual images of land and territory featured particularly strongly in the Soviet posters and cartoons of the 1930s (ibid.: 84). It is thus no surprise that alongside celebration of Soviet industrial achievements the period witnessed a resurgent interest in the region's past and its "Russian" history.

Starting from the late 1930s, a series of literary works dedicated to the seventeenth-century conquest of the Amur region were published, including Gavriil Kungurov's historical novels *Artamoshka Luzin* (1937) and *A Trip to China* (1939), and Daniil Romanenko's *Erofei Khabarov* (1946). Both authors' novels emphasize the patriotism of "ordinary" people participating in expeditions, which is often juxtaposed with the pragmatic-conjunctural and short-sighted approach of ruling elites, who fail to understand the state's true interest.[8] A famous poem of the time, *The Silver Chalice*,

[8]The representations of explorers as "patriots" fighting for the cause of upkeep of territories despite the impediments created by the metropolitan tsarist bureaucrats is a common trope in the narratives of imperial-era colonization of the region (Slezkine 2016: 326).

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authored by Petr Komarov in 1943 and published under the subtitle *The Amur Legend*, establishes direct continuity between the feats of the Cossacks led east by Vassilii Poiarkov and Erofei Khabarov and those of Soviet soldiers fighting fascists on the country's western borders. An anecdote recapitulated by Nikolai Zadornov's son, satirist Mikhail Zadornov, in his memoires, seems to affirm the direct connection between the Soviet leadership's concern about the region's sovereign belonging and the popularization of imperial-era histories. Commenting on the history of publication of his father's novel, Mikhail Zadornov (2007) points out that the *Amur-Saga* initially received a rather cold response from Moscow-based editors. The novel was saved from oblivion by Aleksandr Fadeev, who headed the Union of Soviet Writers and personally delivered the manuscript to Stalin. Mikhail Zadornov draws on family lore to recount the details of Fadeev's dialogue with Stalin: "Later, Fadeev secretly relayed to my mother [Elena Zadornova] … what Stalin said to him about *The Amur-Saga*: 'Zadornov demonstrated that these territories are historically ours. That they were developed [*osvaivalis'*] by working people and not conquered. Well done! His books will be of great use to us in our future relations with China. Should be published and rewarded!'"

While the precise rendition of Stalin's exact words can be reasonably doubted, and one might argue that this doubt also puts the credibility of the entire episode into question, it is nonetheless significant that this is how the novel's unexpected success with Stalin appears to have been interpreted by the Zadornov family. Nor would it be much of a stretch of the imagination to suggest that the novel's careful documentation of Russia's presence on the Amur and its depiction of amiable relations between Russian peasants and the residents of neighboring Nanai settlements might have played a role in its expedited publication and in the official recognition of a work of historical fiction that manifestly deviated from the socialist literary canon and themes of war heroism which dominated the literature in the 1940s.

While focused on the experience of the migrants of the 1860s, the book features frequent references to seventeenth-century Russian exploits on the Amur in the form of stories and tales that settlers hear from local old-timers. In the book's second half, one of the protagonists accidentally finds an old copper cross and fragments of kitchen utensils, while trying to help his Nanai friend set up a vegetable garden. This discovery leads the Nanai character to recall tales from his elders about an Orthodox Russian settler who once lived on the site (Zadornov 2023[1987]). For his part, Zadornov also clearly considered the preservation of the pre-Soviet Russian history of the Amur to be crucial for the Soviet project of regional development: "The first [Russian] explorers came here in the seventeenth century. The memory about them was preserved in the Nanai fairy tales and numerous published reports of the Cossack sergeant-explorers. I was convinced that the more solid we made the foundation, the stronger would be the building that we were constructing. History gave us everything for it. One cannot forget the past…" (ibid.: 11).

The Sino-Soviet split in 1960 and Beijing's irredentism, which laid claim to the Soviet Far East as part of China's "historical frontier" (Stephan 1994: 18), generated new territorial anxieties and further reinforced the need to amplify the Far East's pre-Soviet, Russian history.[9] This period was marked by active attempts to eliminate from the official historiography references to Chinese pre-seventeenth (and in some cases

[9]For more on the Soviet press's construction of the images of China, see Urbansky (2012).

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pre-nineteenth) century presence in the region, which culminated in a massive renaming campaign in the early 1970s aimed at erasure of historically Chinese toponyms (ibid.: 19). After the 1970s, there was also a spike of popular interest in the first, unsuccessful Russian attempts to colonize the region in the seventeenth century. One such example is the commemoration of Albazin—a military settlement established in the upper Amur branches in the 1660s by a gang of escaped prisoners from Siberia. Despite its founders' ambiguous legal status, Albazin was formally claimed by Russian authorities in 1672, but eventually relinquished to the Qing Empire following a series of protracted battles in 1685–1686.[10] In 1973, an Irkutsk-based publishing house reprinted Gavriil Kungurov's 1939 novel *A Trip to China*, renamed *Albazin Fortress*.[11] In 1974, due to the advocacy of a local history enthusiast and descendant of Amur Cossacks, Agrippina Dorohina, a Museum of the History of Priamurie Settlement was opened in Albazino village (Glebova 2011). In 1978, a Khabarovsk-region publishing house produced a series of essays entitled *Russian Villages are Standing on the Amur*, dedicated to the histories of the Amur's oldest Russian settlements. The essays first appeared in a Blagoveshchensk-based newspaper, *Amurskaia Pravda,* and were initiated by a local correspondent, Valerii Cherkasov, who in 1976 used the still-ongoing tensions at the Chinese border to convince the editorial board to publish a series of historical features that opened with his own essay on Albazin (2019). The images of first explorers, celebrated as "Columbuses of the Amur," also feature prominently in the 1970-edited collection *Amur—the River of Feats*, which traces the history of the region's settlement from the seventeenth century to the late Soviet era. The Foreword to the collection explicitly refers to the Amur region as "sacred Russian land," solidifying the connection between imperial-era exploits and Soviet territorial sovereignty (Kiriukhin 1970: 7): "But nothing could stop the movement of Russian people to the East 'towards the sun.' The courage of Vasilii Poiarkov, Erofei Khabarov, and their companions, of the brave defenders of Albazin asserted once and for all the idea that this land is ours, Russian and that as long as Russian people are alive, they will never give it away to anyone."

The collection's texts, ranging from the memoires of early Russian visitors to the Amur and detailed depictions of the region's nature and geography to historical essays, emphasize establishing continuity between the imperial-Russian and Soviet efforts to develop the region by drawing explicit parallels between the patriotism of Cossack explorers and peasant settlers as well as Soviet volunteers. In that spirit, one of the collection's texts directly calls for preservation of the memory of Permskoe settlers, "the brave and freedom loving Russian people," who overcame numerous adversities to establish the first settlements on the site. "If Komsomolsk—is the city of our fathers' youth, then the village [Permskoe]—is the youth of our grandfathers and great grandfathers," he concludes (ibid.: 550).

As the above discussion suggests, the region's pre-Soviet history, including that of Permskoe village, was an inalienable part of Soviet-era historiography, even though its level of visibility in the public sphere varied across the decades. The conflicting narratives of Soviet development of the eastern frontier, which oscillated between

[10]Commemoration of Albazin history remains an important feature of Cossack historical imagination in the region (Humphrey 2012).

[11]The book was previously reprinted in 1959 in Moscow under the title *Albazin Fortress.*

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depictions of Soviet builders as inheritors of imperial-era exploits and images of Komsomol builders as "trailblazers" creating a radically new world, inevitably generated occasional tensions, especially in the context of planned cities like Komsomolsk. Nevertheless, Soviet authorities and intellectuals clearly regarded the Amur region's imperial-era history as "a usable past," which, while not systematically foregrounded, was always kept ready to be taken off the shelf and amplified in moments of geopolitical tension. However, I shall show the specificity of the Far East's geopolitical context was only one factor that fueled public interest in the region's pre-Soviet history. The search for "deep history" also emerged as a tool for establishing "rootedness" in a new locale in the context of the permanent in- and out-migration that characterized the region for most of its Soviet history, and which became a major stumbling block to the formation of a collective localized identity.

From the Search for "Deep History" to "Alternative History"

While postwar Soviet society was characterized by relatively high levels of geographical mobility (Fitzpatrick 1989; Rahmonova-Schwarz 2010), remote and underpopulated areas like the Far North and the Far East, which were targets of organized labor recruitment campaigns, were notable for a particularly strong imbalance between locally born and recently resettled populations (Bliakher 2004; Thompson 2009; Vlasov 2014). In remote, industrial centers like Komsomolsk, whose expanding industries were perpetually starved for labor, Soviet efforts to address workforce shortages through Komsomol mobilizations, deployment of military-builders, prison labor, and a combination of monetary and non-monetary incentives for relocation contributed to an increased sense of transience and impermanence (Rockhill-Khlinovskaya 2010). Consequently, for many of the city's residents, familiarization with local history and ecology carried out as part of *kraievedenie* involved not so much a process of "rediscovering their own roots" or "the traditions of their forefathers" as exploration of the new territory they came to "inhabit."

From the city's inception, local politics were shaped by the tension between the embrace of internationalism, embodied by the culturally and ethnically diverse cohorts of first-builders, and the desire to produce a unified identity that would fix settlers to the new place. Although celebration of Komsomol internationalism has been the cornerstone of the city's mythology, already in the first years of construction local authorities concerned themselves with the problem of transcending the builders' connections to their original homelands and producing a new, collective identity defined entirely by the Soviet symbolic order. During their first years on site, many builders were forced to live in tents or haphazardly built huts, which were often organized along diasporic lines. To facilitate navigation in the dark, each tent entry was marked by a plaque with the name of its occupants' hometown—Moscow, Kiev, Odessa, Leningrad, and Rostov, to name just a few (Savenkova 2001). This practice led the writer Vera Ketlinskaia, who visited the site in 1935, to describe Komsomolsk as "the city of forty cities" (ibid.: 143). The diasporic nature of the young city's builders promptly came to be regarded as a problem by authorities, who took measures to dissolve regionally based co-habitation patterns and work units organized by territorial origin; they transformed *zemliachestva*, or "compatriotic formations," into multi-ethnic, international brigades (ibid.). In this context, the act of renaming Permskoe as "Komsomolsk" was intended both to officialize the change in the settlement's status

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and to provide a novel name that would promote a new shared identity among the city's builders. This is how the process of name selection, precipitated by an unprovoked remark by one of the workers, is narrated in the documentary novel *A Feat on the Amur*, authored by first-builders Efim Dorodnov and Gennadii Khlebnikov (1967: 35):

> "We shall of course build the city. This is why we came here from ten thousand miles away. But what return address shall we use?"—came a reasonable voice from the furthermost corner—"Permskoe village? But what kind of village is it, if it has seven thousand residents! Moreover, the village is somewhat separated from the construction. The village is by itself. We were not the ones who built it, and we should not be the ones to use its name.… And it is a bit awkward to say 'village' when writing back home to Kharkiv. They might think that we came here to cut hay."

This remark sparks an animated discussion in which the participants brainstorm new names until finally settling on Komsomolsk (ibid.). The idea that the new name was crucial for "rooting" workers in a new place is also supported by the account of the events provided by Zhukov and Izmailova in their documentary collection, *The Beginning of the City* (1977: 90): "…Komsomolsk—the city of the Komsomol—this is what is being built here, in the taiga! Komsomol members are building not a regular factory, or a regular township—they are building the world's first city of Komsomol. And no one will miss Viatka, Odessa, Rostov, if we call it Komsomolsk."

The epic tale of the first-builders' triumph over nature and the rhetorical emphasis on preservation of "the traditions of *pervostroiteli*" were important tools for cultivating urban identity among newcomers. Yet, for some of the city's new residents, it was familiarization with the locale's folklore, coupled with exploration of its topography, that enabled them to establish a stronger connection with the place. This is how Nikolai Zadornov (2023[1987]: 10) reflects on the impact his first experience of exploring the surrounding wilderness had on him: "When I returned to Komsomolsk after the Summer spent in the taiga, I not only wrote essays for the newspaper but also felt myself to be a local resident in a much greater degree than before, when I was only walking in the city streets and its institutions." While the exploration of local geography and lore helped Zadornov forge a stronger connection with the site, the imperial-era history he vividly described in his book also enabled many of his readers to re-imagine their relationship to Komsomolsk. As the writer and first-builder Gennadii Khlebnikov put it in his 1981 op-ed devoted to Zadornov's literary legacy:

> An artist, historian, and patriot—the author of the novel helped us, young builders of Komsomolsk who already lived on the Amur for several years, to get a fuller picture of the Amur region in all its beauty, to understand its historical, political, and cultural meaning for the fate of the Motherland. For the first time, we felt with such force that reverent temporal connection—a connection between generations of Russian people without which a sincere and strong love for our native land cannot exist.

Written at the height of Sino-Soviet tensions, Khlebnikov's op-ed illustrates the ways in which territorial concerns normalized the return of ethnically marked discourses of "Russianness" as a source of Soviet sovereignty in the region. Praising the

international success of Zadornov's novels that were translated into several languages, the first-builder proceeds to observe: "Only in Beijing do they treat N. P. Zadornov's works with angry annoyance. And this annoyance is understandable: in his books Zadornov exposes the brazen manipulation of historical facts the Beijing hegemonists resort to as they covet millions of square kilometers of lands of China's neighboring states, including the Soviet Union. The Soviet Amur and Maritime lands never belonged to China—such are the facts of history. They found convincing proof in the works of our compatriot."

This inscription of Permskoe's history into the geopolitical battles of the time inevitably elevated the relevance of imperial-era Russians to the lives of Komsomolsk's internationalist residents and stirred further interest in the village. While fascination with deep history cannot be described as a dominant trend among Komsomolsk residents, it was notably visible among the local intelligentsia—artists, journalists, regional studies specialists, pedagogues, and writers.

During Komsomolsk's active construction years, Permskoe's architectural legacy was frequently repurposed for the builders' needs and treated no differently than the centuries-old forest densely covering territories destined to become the streets and squares of the new city. The village's first and only church was unceremoniously converted into a club for Komsomol members and then a canteen, before it was bulldozed to make way for a bus terminal. The few remaining wooden houses used to house Komsomol brigades during the first years of construction were likewise demolished in the 1960s and the city was entirely cleared of any material traces of the village it subsumed. The first huts created by Komsomol builders suffered a similar fate, despite calls by some first-builders for at least one to be preserved as a monument. The future-oriented, utopian city that for much of its history lived in permanent anticipation of its forthcoming glorious heyday had little interest in heritagization of the material environment that predated and helped deliver it. As Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov (2016: 694) insightfully observes, the perception of the present as a continuous construction project, whose end goals keep shifting, and whose results are constantly deferred, was an ingrained feature of the Soviet-era temporal imagination, with "the scaffolding" itself being the most stable element of social life. These moving signposts and constant reworking of the façade of Soviet modernity notwithstanding, "the never-ending construction" also generated cumulative and tangible results in "the interim," which made the progress appear measurable. In Komsomolsk specifically, by the 1980s the expedited postwar urban development had generated a reversal of the previously iconoclastic stance toward cultural and natural heritage. It was replaced with a nostalgic and sentimental gaze on the local past after the triumph of a Soviet industrialism that appeared to be fully cemented.

The economic restructuring program of Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev, known as *Perestroika*, and its accompanying political principle of *Glasnost*, or "openness," created the space for a reevaluation of Komsomolsk's history and the city's once-sacrosanct founding mythologies. It spurred numerous publications dedicated to previously silenced aspects of local history. Many of the debates surrounding that history revolved around the question of the respective contributions to construction efforts made by volunteers and labor-migrants versus Gulag inmates. The popular image of Komsomolsk oscillated between Soviet-era tropes of a luminous "City at Dawn" and grim images of a grey prison ground built on the bones of thousands of innocent victims. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, *Dalnevostochnyi Komsomolsk*

became a platform for a protracted debate about the city's history between the few surviving first-builders and liberal intellectuals and regional studies experts engaged in publicizing facts about Soviet-era repressions (Fomina n.d.). This period also saw an exponential increase in the number of local publications devoted to Permskoe. Many of them drew attention to the repressions some village residents suffered during the Stalinist *de-kulakization* campaigns and/or bemoaned the destruction of the village's material heritage.

One of the most prominent voices in these debates was the regional studies specialist Svetlana Vishniakova, who authored several books and articles about the village from 1988 onward. Vishniakova was among the first visible cultural actors to openly speak about a direct historical continuity between Permskoe and Komsomolsk. Her publications, which often consisted of long excerpts from interviews with descendants of Permskoe's founders, were occasionally accompanied by short preambles about the importance of history. In the 1988 article that launched her Permskoe series, Vishniakova asserted, "a sense of the Motherland is inseparable from a sense of history" and that Komsomolsk's history did not start in 1932.[12] She later reiterated this idea that the roots of Komsomolsk's "family tree" reach into the last century in her follow-up 1989 piece:

> …our city was built not on an empty site, but on the site of Permskoe village. Not next to the village, but on the very ground where before it stood a Russian village, meaning that the builders continued the biography of life on the left bank of the Amur. And we are not that rich in history to throw away these important pages. The record should be started from the first notch, first house, as it was customary in Rus'. August 18, 1860—this is the date of fortification [*ukrepleniia*], of rooting [*ukoreneniia*].[13]

Vishniakova's sentiments were later echoed in a 1991 publication by I. Ovchinnikov entitled "The Wheel of Forgetfulness." Its author laments the neglect of Komsomolsk's deep history as he points out that Permskoe was founded before Vladivostok, which was then preparing to celebrate its 130th anniversary: "Why are we forgetting about this? Why, with a stubbornness that could have been put to better use, do we break the historical link of times and generations? By counting the city's history from 1932, cultivating the myth of the city of youth built by Komsomol members, we put ourselves in the position of 'amnesiac Ivans.'"[14] The author's evocation of "amnesiac Ivans" (*Ivan nepomniaschii rodstva*)—an expression used to refer to individuals who reject their roots and any moral obligation to their kin and community—becomes a metaphor for the perceived iconoclastic nature of the Soviet project, which shunned "the old world" in the name of building a new one. Anticipating objections from imaginary interlocutors, Ovchinnikov clarifies that he does not wish to deny the contributions of the Komsomol but instead seeks public acknowledgment that "the Russian people," who created Permskoe, survived and labored for their country's good in equally harsh conditions. He points out that Leningrad's age was not counted from the year of that

[12]Svetlana Vishniakova, "Ot Sela Permskogo do Goroda na Zare: Iz Istorii Komsomolska-na-Amure," *Dalnevostochnyi Komsomolsk*, 15 Nov. 1988.

[13]Svetlana Vishniakova, "Istoriia Sela Permskogo-na-Amure," *Dalnevostochnyi Komsomolsk*, 11 Aug. 1989.

[14]Ovchinnikov, I. 1991, "Koleso Bespamiatstva," *Dalnevostochnyi Komsomolsk*, 12 Mar. 1991.

city's renaming, and bemoans that Permskoe's founders, whom he calls "the city's first-builders," were forgotten. He asserts that the question of memory, which some might regard as "secondary" in the context of the political and economic crisis gripping the country, is of foremost importance in overcoming the aforementioned crisis, and that the city's social problems cannot be resolved until Komsomolsk residents understand they "live in the city built on the site where Permskoe was founded 131 years ago" (ibid.).

This denunciation of historical amnesia remained a leitmotif of discussions of Permskoe throughout the late 1980s and 1990s. During that period the accounts of Komsomolsk's construction take an increasingly bleak turn, and reconceptualize it as the end of Permskoe's idyllic life rather than the beginning of a new future. The first planes and steamers that arrived on the site, and which in canonical Soviet accounts were synonymous with "progress" and "modernity," suddenly emerge as ominous symbols foreshadowing the village's destruction.[15] This is how Fyodor Boltov, who participated in the city's construction in the 1930s, described his stance on history in a 1990 op-ed:

> Permskoe village, which did not cause any problem to anyone, was plundered, factory workshop #26 was built on the site of its cemetery. This is a grave crime against those Russian people who in 1860 traveled over two years on horseback to this faraway land. Not everyone dared to accomplish such a heroic feat in those times—on horses over eight thousand kilometers. It is they who are the heroes […]. And no one cares about those explorers with mighty Russian souls. They are the ones to whom the real glory is due.[16]

The period of *Glasnost* marked an important turn in Permskoe commemoration characterized by ever-more antagonistic representations of the village and the city that succeeded it. It was also during this period that failure to preserve the village's material heritage and ground it in local historiography came to be viewed as a result of intentional efforts by the Soviet state to "erase" the village's first settlers and replace their memory with the "myth" of Komsomol pioneers. If during much of the Soviet era Permskoe's legacy was viewed as a "deep history" that complemented and bolstered the socialist city's success, from the late 1980s onward, Komsomolsk came to be construed as "a destroyer" rather than a successor of the Russian village. As engagement with Permskoe's past shifted from the search for a deep history to a quest for an "alternative origin story" that was not marred by the moral stain of prison labor and violent repression, the destruction of Permskoe came to be read as Komsomolsk's "original sin," which, some authors hinted, preordained the utopian city's imminent economic collapse. The arguments over the dark pages of Komsomolsk's history and the significance of Permskoe to the city's past and present continued to feature prominently in the local press throughout the 1990s and were central to shaping historiographic debates in local cultural circles. However, this discussion did not receive substantial public attention since it was eclipsed by broader debates about the city's fragile economic future in light of unfolding market reforms. Only two decades later, after the dust of the dramatic economic and infrastructural collapse had

[15]See, for example, Aleksei Grivoriev, "Rozhdenie Amurskogo Chevengura," *Dalnevostochnyi Komsomolsk*, 14 Nov. 1991.

[16]Fedor Boltov, "Doli Slavy ne Vypalo Nam," *Dalnevostochnyi Komsomolsk*, 10 Aug. 1990.

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settled, did public discussion about the place of Permskoe in the city's official historiography resurface.

Memory Wars and Asynchronous Belonging

The 2015 petition to the City Duma requesting the recalculation of Komsomolsk's age coincided with active efforts by the city's administration and civil society to diversify the local economy and rebrand Komsomolsk as a destination for heritage tourism. The plan presupposed active development of industrial tourism that would exhibit Soviet and post-Soviet technological achievements, coupled with an ethnographic bent that would showcase the region's pre-Soviet history, including its indigenous people and imperial Russian settlers. In 2015, the city announced the construction of the "Permskoe Village" ethnographic tourism complex. This project, which has since stalled due to lack of investment, envisioned recreated cottages on the Amur riverbank that would reconstruct the material culture of the Permskoe villagers as well as that of residents of the Nanai Dzemgi camp. Since 2016, the city has also sponsored yearly anniversary celebrations for Permskoe. The festivities usually include short plays staged by theater troops, musical performances that showcase traditional Russian, Cossack, and Nanai songs, dances, and games, and educational lectures about the history of Permskoe and Nanai settlements.

This revival of interest in Permskoe memorialization was part of a broader process of rediscovering pre-revolutionary heritage in post-Soviet Russia, driven by efforts to reestablish continuity between imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet traditions and identities. In the great majority of Russian cities, where this "rediscovery" was initiated much earlier, the process has been marked by demolition of Soviet monuments, reinstatement of original toponyms renamed after the revolution, and restoration of churches and historical architecture which declined during the Soviet era (Kelly 2015; Kinossian 2012; Marin 2017). Similar practices could not be easily imitated in Komsomolsk, though, since the city's entire symbolic topography, including street names, monuments, and architecture, was rooted in the socialist era. With the near-complete absence of either a material or cultural legacy from Permskoe in residents' daily lives, this small nineteenth-century village came to be regarded by the public as a historical curiosity with little to no relevance to the city's present. Yet, this was not the main reason why the proposal to merge Permskoe and Komsomolsk's histories into a single, inseparable past proved to be such a divisive issue for residents. The debates about the city's age unwittingly engendered a clash of two historiographic views on the meaning of the great construction that took place on the Amur River in the 1930s.

For Anton Ermakov and supporters of his recalculation initiative, Komsomolsk's construction was but a continuation of the history of Permskoe, a history that is still unfolding today, as he maintained that the village never ceased to exist but was instead *transformed* into Komsomolsk-na-Amure. Grounding his case in the fact that the 1932 decree proclaiming the creation of Komsomolsk speaks of "transformation" and "renaming," Ermakov suggested the recalculation of the city's age would amount to "a restoration of historical justice": "If the Presidium of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee resolved to transform the village into a city with the new name, … without issuing a decree about the liquidation of the village Permskoe, then one should speak about the continuity [*preemstvennost'*] and unified chronology of the inhabited locality" (DVKHAB.RU, 22 July 2016).

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By contrast, opponents of the initiative insisted that in 1932, once the first-builders had arrived and erected the first factories, the history of Permskoe ended and that of Komsomolsk began. This position was supported by several local journalists and bloggers as well as by members of the socialist *People's Power* movement, which advocates for preservation of the city's Soviet heritage. Unconvinced by the journalist's "pedantic" reasoning, they dismissed the formulation used in the decree as an "historical accident" that did not reflect the true meaning of the events of 1932, when a new city was born.

Throughout the Soviet era, for many residents, the proud status of Komsomolsk as an industrial powerhouse and living symbol of the triumph of Soviet modernization played an important role in moderating the negative aspects and material difficulties associated with living in a remote, provincial city affected by adverse climate conditions and generally lacking in civilian and leisure infrastructures.[17] The latter hardships were also counterbalanced by the generous government benefits extended to residents of the Soviet Far North, including subsidized travel across the country, higher wages, and longer vacations, as well as a sense of visible and consistent, albeit gradual improvement in the urban environment. This trend dramatically reversed in the 1990s, when Komsomolsk residents were forced to grapple with a rapid devaluation that was both economic and symbolic. In this context of uncertainty and creeping deindustrialization, the commemoration of *pervostroiteli* and their original sacrifice in the name of creating a new frontier became still further solidified in the discourse on Komsomolsk's identity. The narratives of the Soviet people's achievements and their sacrifices became central not only to articulating critiques of the city's current decay and precarious state, but also for asserting the duty to restore and further develop these achievements.

Concerns about the devaluation or decentering of Komsomolsk's "heroic" Soviet history were at the heart of most objections residents raised against the recalculation initiative. Ermakov's 2015 post on the local forum KOMCITY.RU invited forum participants to express their opinions on his motion to return Komsomolsk to its "historical age." This triggered a heated discussion spanning more than 150 replies, the great majority of them critical. Alongside skeptical takes that did not object to the initiative per se but wondered whether it would contribute to any positive change to residents' lives were frequent efforts to uncover ulterior motives or the nefarious agendas of parties lobbying for the proposal. Such reactions alleging conspiracy are pervasive in post-Soviet Russia, where seemingly innocuous government projects or grassroots initiatives are treated by the public with suspicion and interpreted as a façade for backstage power games (Oushakine 2009). In the case of the Permskoe debate, the reactions ranged from personal attacks on Ermakov, which accused him of trying to gain fame through controversial public initiatives, to allegations of a coordinated attack on Soviet memory aimed at further justifying neoliberal policies and fragmentation of local industries. As one commentor put it, "This is how the shuffling of facts occurs, the contributions of some people are downplayed and those of others get exaggerated. I think you simply do not like the fact that over the sixty

[17]The discourse of pride and willingness to overcome privations in the name of further developing Komsomolsk is common in the memoires, open letters to newspapers, and television interviews of residents. While such sentiments were far from universal, as attested by the historic problem the city had with retaining migrants, the tropes of heroism reproduced by official propaganda were readily adopted by those who could not or did not want to leave when publicly narrating their lives.

years of its existence, the USSR was capable of creating a modern city in the harshest conditions—a testimony to the heroism of our people." The speculations about the proposal's hidden "anti-Soviet" agenda were further fueled by Ermakov's involvement in another, equally controversial proposal to remove Lenin's monument from the eponymous square in the city center and replace it with a memorial for Vladimir Kostenko, the naval architect who designed the Amur Shipbuilding Plant.

Though some of the initiative's defenders insisted that their proposal was merely aimed at "fixing" a technical-historical inaccuracy rather than offering politically charged evaluations of history, their desire to reinstate the Russian village's place in local history was undeniably connected to attempts to produce a new vision of the national past. In the course of the polemic, a few debaters wondered why Permskoe, and not the older Nanai Dzemgi settlement, was chosen as a starting point for calculating the city's age. This rhetorical question was invariably invoked to illustrate the perceived absurdity of recalculation. In response, the initiative's supporters were quick to point out that neither Permskoe nor Komsomolsk could reasonably claim succession from Dzemgi, which had little to do with the history of "Russian statehood." While this dismissiveness toward local indigenous history is hardly surprising and reflects pervasive attitudes in the region's Russian-majority urban centers, the fact that many Komsomolsk residents would see both Dzemgi and Permskoe as *equally irrelevant* requires further elucidation. To many of the commentors who objected to the initiative, what was at stake was not the question of the city's age but rather that of its essence, which they asserted was inextricably linked to Soviet modernity and radically different from that of Permskoe. Here is a representative comment:

> The creation of Komsomolsk was an absolutely new and revolutionary decision in the life of our country and people. The city was built not as a continuation of the already existing local lifeworld, but as an entirely new industrial-manufacturing center—an organism, to which later the entire transport infrastructure was stretched, as if it was a cardiovascular system that was securing the development of all inhabited localities of our region. And all these word games about whether something was transformed or renamed will remain just that—a simple word game and even verbiage. Because the true birth of the city was conditioned by the era and the people who represented it—Komsomol members who did not just give a new impulse to the development of Permskoe, but created and gave birth to a new city Komsomolsk-na-Amure that bore no resemblance to anything that existed before it. And one should start the chronicle of the city precisely from the Komsomol first-builders and not the settlers who lived here [before them] but neither turned this locality into a meaningful geographic toponym nor created here any commercial, industrial, or trade [craft] post here (*KOMCITY.RU* 2015).

A similar view on Permskoe's historical insignificance was expressed by another commentor:

> In practice the history of the city began in 1932. Khabarovka, for instance, developed systematically and gradually first as a village and then as a military outpost which survived to this day in the form of a city. But in Komsomolsk's case things were different. The government needed to build a FACTORY. And more than one.… Permskoe had nothing to do with that. They could have built it in any other location…. Yes, the builders came there [to Permskoe], but they

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> used it as no more than a foothold. They came and began constructing a NEW FACTORY and a NEW CITY…. One should consider Permskoe and Komsomolsk as two separate inhabited localities. And the fact that the village was transformed into the city is just a technical moment that does not justify the revision of history.… The Komsomol members were choosing a name for a new city, not for renaming an already existing village.… Permskoe accidentally ended up within the boundaries of the city and was SUBSUMED by it. It naturally melted into time. Its history ended.

The responses on the forum seem to align with the results of a 2015 poll carried out by the newspaper *Nash Gorod*, which asked readers whether they thought "Komsomolsk's age should be increased by taking into account the age of Permskoe village." Out of 314 respondents, 53.8 percent insisted that the village and city are "two different inhabited localities," 28.3 percent agreed that the village's age should be considered, and 17.8 percent chose, "I don't care, I am not interested in history." However animated, the polemic was limited to a small fraction of enthusiasts on both sides of the divide, who had enough investment in the topic to make their voices heard through articles, online posts, or survey participation. While the analysis of public discourse may not reveal the full range of views held by ordinary residents, or the views of the proverbial "silent majority," it nevertheless tells us a great deal about how local memory activists—individuals with the ambition to shape the city's public culture and urban policies—understood the stakes of the battle for history.

Although the formal request for adjusting Komsomolsk's age has lapsed since 2015, in subsequent years news reports about memorial events for Permskoe have been accompanied by renewed discussions, with residents committed to Soviet identity regarding any attempt to memorialize Permskoe as a prelude to recalculation—an act they fear will be followed by renaming the city. On 18 June 2020, in preparation for the celebration of Permskoe's 160th anniversary, The Coordination Bureau of the Komsomolsk-na-Amure Public Council held a preliminary discussion of another proposal—to rename the front section of the city's central Pervostroiteli Avenue as the Avenue of First Settlers (*Pervykh Pereselentsev*), as a symbolic gesture to underscore the continuity of generations. Council's Chair Igor' Shevtsov supported the idea of memorializing Permskoe but pointed out the difficulties associated with changing housing numeration when splitting an existing avenue into two parts.[18] The meeting concluded with the decision to carry out a public discussion and to solicit citizens' opinions about local toponyms to be named after Permskoe's founders. The appeal for suggestions shared in local newspapers and social media platforms triggered a new wave of negative comments, which ranged from expressions of concern over spending the city's already stretched budget on "useless" memorial initiatives to further accusations of an orchestrated attack on Soviet memory. In the discourse of opponents of Permskoe's memorialization, commemoration was clearly understood as a zero-sum game, with any recognition of Permskoe residents' contributions being treated as tarnishing the heroism of the Komsomol brigades. The histories of the two settlements have turned into proxies for the Imperial Russian and Soviet legacies, and some sardonically compared the incongruous

[18]"K Pervostroiteliam Komsomol'ska Predlagaiut Dobavit' Pervoposelentsev," *Khabarovskii Krai Segodnia*, 23 June 2020, https://www.todaykhv.ru/news/society/27451/ (accessed 20 May 2024).

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unification of Permskoe and Komsomolsk with an attempt to "attach the tail of an old, long dead horse to a new tractor."[19]

I suggest that these polarized positions around memory should be understood as two ideologically divergent but entangled responses to shared and persisting anxieties about the city's place in regional and national histories. The collapse of the Soviet project triggered a severe crisis in a frontier city whose *raison d'etre* was to fulfill the developmental and security logics of the Soviet state. While federal authorities have stabilized the city's economy and major industries since the 1990s, they have not been able to offer a compelling vision of a future that denizens could draw on to justify their continued residence in a remote city with decaying infrastructure. This failure to articulate a new trajectory of development in the wake of the Soviet collapse generated a regime of historicity characterized by asynchronous belonging, which not only fragmented society along historical lines based on the moments different social groups chose to use as starting points for narrating their lives, but also exacerbated politicization and mutual rejection of rival historical imaginaries. While liberal-leaning segments of society struggled to find in Permskoe an alternative origin story disconnected from the Soviet past, members of the community who remained invested in Soviet identity insisted on separating socialist history from other settlement projects. Such a desynchronization of belonging was neither an inherent nor a geographically universal feature of the Russian historical imagination in the wake of the post-Soviet transition. In his analysis of memory in the post-Soviet Eastern Transbaikalia region, Peshkov argues that the mythicized narratives of Cossack resistance during the Civil War emerged as an alternative political nostalgia that failed to translate into an ideological or political project. Instead, the images of China's borderland émigré communities, demonized as "mortal political enemies" during the Soviet era, became depoliticized and "de-dramatized" through mundane encounters with Cossack repatriates and their integration into local communities (2014). By contrast, the memory of Permskoe, an object of nostalgia for the late-Soviet intelligentsia, became radically *re-politicized* in the post-Soviet era, turning it into a locus of belonging for some and an object of vehement resentment for those who see themselves as belonging elsewhere, or else*when*.

Although "belonging" here is fixated on the past, I use the term to signal that the phenomenon in question is much deeper than nostalgia—which can be understood as a sentimental gaze on the past, or a fanciful desire to return to a time and place that no longer exists. In her seminal book *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym (2001: XVIII: 41) distinguishes between *reflective* nostalgia, which lingers on ruins, a sense of loss, and "the longing itself," and *restorative* nostalgia that fuels nationalist and religious revivals or attempts a "transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home." While for Boym restorative nostalgia's key feature is that its subjects do not think of their project as "nostalgic" and instead represent it as a search for an eternal truth, Peter Fritzsche (2002: 65) suggests that nostalgic longing is by definition predicated on an acknowledgment of the impossibility of returning to the past. This "fundamental break with the past," he argues, sets nostalgia aside from regressive or reactionary projects or the politics of reconstructionist movements (ibid.). "Belonging," in this context, represents a middle ground between nostalgia and full-blown revivalist aspirations, as it implies *active* commitment to keeping a historical project alive.

[19] *KOMCITY.RU* 2015, https://kom.city/.

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This emphasis on active commitment and explicit rejection of alternative imaginaries also sets asynchronous belonging apart from other instances of heterochronia—a concept developed by the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and later adopted across the social sciences to describe the co-existence of multiple temporospatial sensibilities (e.g., Lemon 2009; Wirtz 2016).

While heterochronia is far from an uncommon condition and indeed was manifestly present in the Soviet era, it was not until the Soviet project collapsed that the mobilizing power of the contradictions inherent in different temporal imaginaries was unleashed and transformed into a source of open polarization. This is precisely why the question of Komsomolsk's founding moment—that is, when the history one considers socially relevant and wishes to continue began—became so salient after the Soviet collapse. In contrast to empiricist views of the past, which merely treat history as a series of discrete, temporally sequenced events, "belonging" entails a passionate embrace of a particular historical periodization to the exclusion of others. With the frenzy of the debate escalating, opponents of the recalculation initiative increasingly started to refer to Permskoe as not merely "separate" from Komsomolsk, but an inferior settlement that "left nothing after itself" and "was rightfully forgotten." Hoping to recast the imperial era as a new source of collective identity that could replace the "divisive" Soviet legacy, proponents of the village's memorialization continued to speak of Permskoe as "our shared" spiritual and historical heritage. In response, their equally obstinate opponents dismissively referred to the village as "your Permskoe"—a strategically placed possessive adjective that distances the speaker from the object of discussion, suggesting that it has significance to one's interlocutors but not to oneself. Far from fostering societal unity by restoring historical continuity across generations of the Amur's inhabitants, the recalculation initiative instead exposed a yawning chasm between different segments of society and two historical imaginaries rendered unbridgeable by the collapse of the ideological infrastructure that once held them together.

Concluding Remarks

As Nadkarni and Shevchenko observe, in Russia the collapse of Soviet socialism involved both a loss of a feeling of global prestige and geopolitical power and the dissolution of images of the Capitalist West as an ideological Other that could be invoked to justify and normalize relative material deprivation (2014: 68). In frontier regions like the Russian Far East, this final unraveling of the post-national Soviet imaginary was experienced across several scales, as it was also accompanied by the breakdown of a regional fantasy of the eastern borderlands' strategic significance and the prestige associated with residing in these remote but politically vital territories. In Komsomolsk, these narratives of the city's "special status" as the region's major military-industrial base were particularly important for justifying residence in a geographically isolated settlement, separated from the regional capital city, Khabarovsk, by more than 400 kilometers of scarcely populated land. The multi-scalar collapse of this symbolic imagination also coincided with a dramatic constriction of geographical mobility, as many residents of remote territories previously accustomed to regular trips to visit kin and iconic cultural landmarks in western Russia suddenly found themselves no longer able to afford long-distance travel (ibid.: 65).

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Recent decades have witnessed sustained attention to the ways in which temporal imaginations were reconfigured in the Russia-China borderlands in the wake of the collapse of socialist modernity and its linear conception of progress (Billé 2016; Billé and Humphrey 2021; Humphrey 1992; Peshkov 2014; Pulford 2024; Ssorin-Chaikov 2016). As Ed Pulford (2024: 235) demonstrates in his illuminating ethnographic study of Hunchun—a multiethnic city at the intersection of the Sino-Russian and Sino-Korean borders, hit hard by deindustrialization—China's spectacular global rise has kept the idea of progress tenable across the region despite the "patchy" nature of the prosperity it has brought. In many Russian frontier settlements, calamitous industrial decline at home has been paralleled by the meteoric rise of urban modernity on the Chinese side of the border, which has forced the Russian population to grapple with the reversal of its economic fortunes and previous geopolitical hierarchies, while also enabling it to construct new imaginaries of the future built on pursuing lucrative opportunities issuing from proximity to an emerging economic powerhouse (Billé 2016). However, the mood remained cheerless in towns and villages further removed from the border and less likely to directly benefit either from the potential influx of foreign tourists or the new infrastructural projects meant to ease the transborder flow of people and goods.

Throughout the Soviet era, Permskoe and the history of Russian colonization could be incorporated into a linear historicity that centered the imagery of progressive development and celebrated the transformation of a peasant village into a modern utopian city. This regime of historicity and its forward-looking narrative became destabilized after 1989, when local residents experienced a systematic reversal of the hard-won gains of modernization and an abrupt disappearance of this linear imagery. When the USSR dissolved and the capitalist transition began, the city was flooded with rumors about plans by the then-acting First Deputy Prime Minister Egor Gaidar to "liquidate" and "depopulate" Komsomolsk and reduce it to an oil and timber extraction site operated by seasonal workers in rotating shifts. This destabilization of linear historicity triggered a pervasive search for a new temporal model that could anchor local history in the national project. In this context, Permskoe emerged as an "alternative history"—one that inscribed Komsomolsk's past into a longer history of Russian ethno-national presence on the Amur, where planned industrialization was but one episodic event, and in which the city's future did not have to be intrinsically tied to socialist values. Such a historical vision proved to be at odds with the aspirations of the many residents who saw themselves as descendants and heirs of the Komsomol first-builders and who insisted that Soviet industrial achievements should be restored and further developed, lest the entire history of Komsomolsk be rendered meaningless. Ironically, it was not until after the USSR's collapse that an explicit rejection of the Permskoe legacy, which local intelligentsia mistakenly ascribed to Soviet historiography, came to be formulated and even transformed into a popular sentiment. This process was directly connected to growing anxiety about the city's industrial and demographic decline as well as mobilization around Soviet-era symbols as a source of moral and political language used to articulate critiques of market reforms.

The asynchronous belongings fomented on Russia's geographic and economic edges likewise revealed the limitations of the post-Soviet Russian nationalist narrative that attempts to fuse Orthodox Christianity and romanticized visions of imperial Russia with the Soviet past, a narrative which derives its effectiveness from its promise of a dialectical transcendence of past contradictions. While it enjoys a

degree of appeal in large urban centers, the merging of imperial-era and Soviet legacies into a singular historical story of national greatness is contested in the periphery, where reverberations of the Soviet collapse continue to be felt acutely and are made present in daily life in the form of decaying Houses of Culture, closed factory buildings, and unfinished construction projects left to rot—all of which stand in the urban fabric as stark symbols of the unfulfilled dream of socialist modernity. Over the past decade, Russian authorities have implemented a series of programs intended to give a new impulse to the Far East's development, ranging from the provision of free plots of land, known as "the Far Eastern hectare," to the creation of Special Economic Zones with preferential tax regimes meant to attract foreign investment. While these efforts have helped to slow down and mediate some of the negative economic dynamics, they have failed to reverse the trend of long-term outmigration or to significantly modernize the region's desperately outdated infrastructures. Perhaps even more importantly, these state-driven development policies have remained manifestly consolidatory rather than expansive in their aims (Pulford 2024: 245). Lacking the grandeur and visionary scale of either imperial or Soviet-era approaches to the region, they leave local communities with little to hold onto other than their imagined heroic pasts.

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