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Domesticating Wild Siberia: Russian Trans-Siberian Travel Writing, 1891-1917

As a geographically ambiguous borderland, Siberia is defined by discursively constructed, “imagined” borders. Traditionally dichotomous features from both the “East” and “West” mingle organically. “Authentic” Siberian identity is constantly negotiated and “rediscovered.” While Siberia was traditionally viewed as a forbidding wasteland with no culture or civilization, by the 1880s, this image began to change as Russian peasant migrants began to populate Siberia en masse. The Trans-Siberian Railway further underlined Russian Imperial intentions to not only control, but also develop, “civilize,” and ultimately tame, the Empire’s “Wild East.” This thesis uses late-imperial Russian travel writing after the start of Trans-Siberian Railway construction to elucidate a vignette of Siberia within the Russian imagination. In particular, it examines traveler discourse, which began to depict Siberia as a salubrious frontier to be settled and developed. To Russian observers from the Empire’s Western half, Siberia’s cultural landscape offered fertile ground for them to define Siberia according to their personal, and often contradictory, notions of “Western civilization.”