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Defense Chief Says Time Might Have Come for Reviving Stalin's Arctic Death Road

By The Barents Observer

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Thousands died of hunger and cold as they laid rails across the desolate areas of North Siberia. Now Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu hints he is ready to give the Transpolar Mainline project a new shot.

It was one of the many monstrous projects started by Josef Stalin. The railway line was to be built across the swamps and wetlands of northern Siberia from Salekhard on the western banks of River Ob to Igarka on the shores of River Yenisey. The construction works started in 1947 and continued until the death of the Soviet leader in 1953.

The distance is a whopping 1,300 km.

It is unknown how many people perished in the construction works, but they can be counted

in the thousands. Almost all of them were Gulag prisoners, many arrested on political grounds after the war.

Two major Gulag facilities were established for the construction: the so-called 501 Railroad beginning on the River Ob and the 503 Railroad beginning on the River Yenisey.

Between 80,000 and 120,000 people are believed to have labored on the new piece of infrastructure in the six-year period. It was called the Transpolar Mainline. But for many, it was instead referred to as Stalin's Death Road.

Hundreds of kilometers were built, but the project never completed. At least 600 km were left to construct when the new rulers in Moscow abandoned the project in 1953. In addition, a major part of the line that actually was built was soon destroyed by frost heaves and structural failures.

But the line between Nadym and Novy Urengoy later became fully functional, along with the westernmost section between Labytnangi and Chum. Both remain in operation today.

Railway to Norilsk

Now, 70 years after Stalin's project launch, the Transpolar Mainline might ultimately face revival.

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In a meeting in the Russian Geographical Society this week, Shoigu made clear that he is ready to have a fresh look at the project. "We would like to study it more closely, in more detail," the minister underlined.

"Maybe there is a perspective for reviving this project for our country and for the development of Siberia," the minister said in the meeting.

Included in the plans of the defense minister is the extension of the line all the way to Norilsk, the industrial city in the Taymyr Peninsula.

In the chair next to the defense chief sat the president himself. President Vladimir Putin has made Arctic developments a top priority and he listened attentively as one of his most trusted ministers presented his new idea.

According to Shoigu, representatives of the Defense Ministry will together with the Russian Geographical Society soon set out on an expedition to the area.

Northern Latitudinal Passage

The renewed interest in Transpolar Mainline coincides with federal authorities' determination to build the Northern Latitudinal Passage, a railway project that partly overlaps with the Soviet-era project.

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The Northern Latitudinal Passage will include a railway across the Ob River and new rails on the route previously laid out by the Transpolar line.

The Latitudinal Passage also includes the building of a railway to Sabetta, the new seaport on the northeastern tip of the Yamal Peninsula.

The project was one of few concrete projects highlighted by Putin in his recent address at the Arctic Forum, the conference in St. Petersburg.

The railway projects coincide with several more major infrastructure initiatives in the Russian Arctic. Among them is oil company Rosneft's projected oil pipeline from Vankor in North Siberia to the coast of the Laptev Sea. According to company leader Igor Sechin, the pipeline will connect the rich oil fields in the Vankor area with the Arctic coast and subsequently help boost shipping on the Northern Sea Route.

Like with the railway plans, the projected oil pipeline will cross the great River Yenisey.

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