Avrutin, Eugene M. "The Empire's Races." *Racism in Modern Russia: FROM THE ROMANOV TO PUTIN*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. 9–21. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350097308.0007>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 09:11 UTC.

Copyright © Eugene M. Avrutin 2022. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

CHAPTER 1

THE EMPIRE'S RACES

In a sweeping article entitled “On the Goals and Methods of Anthropology,” published at the turn of the twentieth century in Russia’s leading anthropological journal, Dmitrii Nikolaevich Anuchin marveled at the empire’s human diversity. One of Russia’s eminent anthropologists, Anuchin taught for more than three decades at Moscow University. He wished to produce an exhaustive map of the empire’s races, with the goal of using the most innovative tools the field had to offer to gain a better understanding of the population’s racial composition. Such an undertaking would allow experts to make comparisons by considering a wealth of variables, including height and bodily proportions, skin color, hair, eyes, as well as physiological and pathological features that deviated from the statistical norm. In the spirit of cultural pluralism, Anuchin disavowed grand theories of human development, stressing, instead, the role of environmental factors in the creation of racial types.¹

Racial thinking existed long before the vocabulary of race came into being. The projects and policies of early modern European colonial powers constructed hierarchies and transmitted racial prejudices.² But the term “race,” as an organizing principle, entered the West European imagination only in the seventeenth century. Scientists and political theorists relied on theories of race to designate populations by common cultural origins and customs, as well as to order humankind according to psychic and physical expressions, bodily features and structures, blood and shared ancestry, and other observable characteristics. European writers used the two terms interchangeably, frequently referring to races as “nations.” Although enlightenment thinkers such as the German naturalist theorist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach helped establish a fivefold schema

Racism in Modern Russia

to classify populations (from human types with the most brilliant whiteness of skin to the darkest skin color), many of these ideas were without practical application. The modern, exclusionary forms of racism began to appear across Europe and its colonial world—as a mass phenomenon—in the long nineteenth century. The idea that a hierarchy of humankind could be constructed based on absolute differences formed the essence of modern racism, even if the precise contours varied according to each national context.³

The concept of race acquired intellectual prestige in scientific circles. The most respected anthropologists of the day such as Dmitrii Anuchin in Russia or Rudolf Virchow in Germany embraced cultures in all of their diversity. Although both men showed little interest in linking their scholarship to imperialist politics or crude biological thought, they nevertheless believed in the reality of racial thinking: that racial types could be identified by the power of scientific observation. The existence of racial theories—called respectable race science—was deemed to be an important part of social-scientific thought in fin-de-siècle Europe. Scientists, health officials, and journalists relied on racial categories to rank humanity according to established proofs. Some groups such as Jews appropriated the language of race science as a positive form of collective self-expression and self-definition. Even the social scientists who denied the influence of biological determinism on the development of deviance framed their counter arguments in racial terms.⁴

Imperial Russia was no exception to these intellectual developments, although, as with so much else, the debates concerning race emerged later in Russia than they did in Western Europe, North America, and the Atlantic World. The word “*rasa*” appeared in Russia sometime in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The term acquired two broad meanings that could but did not always overlap.⁵ The first, signifying color and following Blumenbach’s five varieties, designated races as white, yellow, red, dark, and black. The second, more ambiguous meaning categorized developed groups such as Slavs, Semites, Caucasians, Greco-Romans, and Turko-Tatars, as well as less sophisticated ones such as Poles, Germans, Chinese, Ukrainians, and Jews as “races” (*rasy*), “types” (*tipy*), or “ethnicities” (*narody*)—based

on highly elaborate and often contradictory physical features and ethnographic descriptions.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, Russia's social and religious landscape became increasingly fluid. Hoping to make sense of the messiness of empire, statisticians, ethnographers, and anthropologists employed the category of ethnicity (*narodnost'* and *natsional'nost'*) to define difference based on a combination of factors such as language, cultural practices, and religion. While Jews, for instance, could not be distinguished from Germans or Slavs by skin color, they could be identified as "Jews" by ethno-cultural descriptions and anatomical characteristics such as brain size and the shape of the nose. Thus, as ethnicity began to acquire intellectual currency to classify populations, so did the belief that difference was racially fixed—intrinsic, unchangeable, and permanent. The gradual shift in documentation practices—from religion and social estate to ethnicity and race—reflected the changing composition of the empire's population along ethno-cultural lines and did not prove remarkable in the *fin de siècle*.⁶

Terms were often used interchangeably. Two contemporary dictionaries, *Desk Dictionary for Reference in All Branches of Knowledge* (1864) and *Russian Encyclopedic Dictionary* (1875), defined race as "tribe" (*plemia*). Tribes, in turn, were distinguished by five groupings: (1) white or Indo-European; (2) yellow-skinned or Asiatic; (3) red-skinned or American; (4) dark-skinned; and (5) Black or African. All tribes could be distinguished by specific bodily features such as nose, hair, eyes, and height.⁷ The term "*plemia*" referenced specific populations but did not delineate a judgement on their destiny or refer to their status within the empire.⁸ The early definition of race or *plemia* established a coherent taxonomy, stressing shared characteristics of humankind.

The Birth of Racism

The Russian field of ethnography was generally characterized by tolerant attitudes toward less developed populations. In their voluminous writings, ethnographers promoted a self-conscious

Racism in Modern Russia

liberal humanism in how they categorized the multiethnic population, paying particular attention to the development of distinct cultural norms and histories.⁹ “At no time have we Russians devoted so much time to the study of our fatherland’s ethnic groups, as we have in the past ten years,” one ethnographer commented in 1872.¹⁰ To be sure, ethnographers, geographers, and administrators referred to *inorodtsy*, or non-Russian peoples of different origins, as “crude,” “savage,” and “dangerous.” Despite these negative assertions, imperial elites had great faith in the civilizing mission: that they could transform the lives of primitive natives by introducing them to Russian ways of life, teaching them the Russian language, and converting them to the dominant Orthodox Russian faith.

Religious toleration provided stability to the imperial state. The Tsars protected the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as all other officially recognized confessions, including Judaism and Islam. Catherine the Great (1729–96) was well aware of both the challenges and limitations of integrating non-Orthodox populations, and especially those peoples residing in the geopolitically sensitive borderland regions. Pragmatic state policies bestowed upon colonial subjects the right to maintain their distinct religious and cultural traditions. Still, the idea of civilizing the unenlightened savage—by introducing the new convert to the Russian way of life and the Christian faith—played an important role in missionary activity. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, large numbers of Russia’s non-Christian subjects (somewhere around four million people, many of whom were pagan or Muslim) converted to Orthodoxy. Although sensational cases of intimidation popped up from time to time, coercive proselytizing was not the primary intent of imperial expansion. Instead, government officials offered a wide range of economic benefits, tax incentives, and subsidies for resettlement to increase the attractiveness of conversion.¹¹

Conversion turned out to be a slow and burdensome process, even as formal religious transfer offered perquisites to new Christians. The first generation of converts found it challenging to assimilate to their new surroundings; many experienced hostilities from their new communities and their former coreligionists. The imperial government continued to promote Russian Orthodoxy in word and deed. But in

the first half of the nineteenth century, some officials began to argue that the regime's missionary zeal needed to be tempered by a healthy skepticism of the convert's motivations. Others voiced reservations about the dangers of forcible conversions. Influential administrators with direct ties to the imperial court expressed skepticism, as well, arguing that all subjects of the empire needed to remain in the confessional church into which they were born.¹²

The idea that religious faith was a matter of birth—and not of personal conviction—had profound implications for the management of the confessional order, as well as for the construction and preservation of group boundaries. The case of Jewish conversion to Christianity provides a striking example of the growing cynicism of baptism. Jews who chose to formally break with their faith found it challenging to distance themselves from family bonds, disown their children, and leave behind the memory of Jewishness. Conversion granted Jews the legal right to start a new life beyond the Pale of Settlement (where most Jews lived, with some exceptions, until the collapse of the imperial order). But somewhere in the mid-nineteenth century, officials began to sound the alarm. Long after their religious transfer, baptized Jews continued to be seen as belonging to the “Jewish race.” The imperial Russian government, responding to the challenges of maintaining clear distinctions, decided to erect barriers. In 1850, the State Council mandated that all converts retain their surnames (upon baptism Jews were ordered to adopt new forenames and patronymics), reasoning that a Jewish-sounding last name would increase the visibility of the new convert and hinder total integration. Imperial administrators' skepticism of the transformative power of Christian rites grew in the last years of the old regime. As racial thinking became widespread, so did the stigma associated with Jewishness (a theme I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 2).¹³

Skulls, Brains, and the Race Question

In the second half of the nineteenth century, two important developments helped to construct increasingly impermeable

Racism in Modern Russia

boundaries. First, in Russia as in other European countries, the disciplines of physical anthropology, criminology, and medicine relied on tools of social knowledge based on statistics, quantitative measurements, and visual representations. The turn from a textual tradition—the province of ethnographic work—to what was regarded as an objective methodology premised on the power of numbers and visuals signified an important innovation in the social-scientific gaze. Anthropologists amassed impressive mounds of data to substantiate their claims. They employed the technique of anthropometry to measure and rank bodily features such as skulls, widely considered the primordial racial trait, directly linked to brain size. They turned to photography to illustrate arguments based on scrutinizable body parts, as well as the invisible or hard-to-read differences.¹⁴

In a review essay of physical anthropology in Russia and the West, Anuchin explained why the discipline began to garner respect for technological innovations in the analysis of skulls, brains, and other bodily features: “There is no doubt that in the near future the importance of anthropology will be even more widespread, that in time it will take a visible place in the field of scientific inquiry. Biologists, doctors, historians, philosophers, and even ordinary educated persons will realize the importance of a greater scientific ‘knowledge of oneself.’”¹⁵ Statistical measurements made it easier to compare anatomical peculiarities among racial groups, establishing common perceptions of deviance and pathology.

Second, the trust in numerical representation provided scientific credibility to common stereotypes and observations. Poles, Jews, Chinese, and other yellow races were perceived as some of the most loathed groups in the empire, subject to discriminatory legislation, but nearly all race scientists agreed that only the Jews represented a unified racial type.¹⁶ Ideologies of anti-Jewish hatred expressed the fears and anxieties of the age. A popular textbook published at the turn of the twentieth century described Jews in the following manner: “In all other countries, the primeval Jew has nearly disappeared, acquiring the manners and customs of the peoples around him. In Russia, on the contrary, [the Jew] has retained his type and ways of life.” Written in an easy to comprehend manner, with the mission of

educating the general public about the empire's ethnic diversity, the authors emphasized the Jew's distinctiveness: "This is a person from another part of the world, of another race, in physical, as well as moral, dimensions."¹⁷

Anthropometric measurements and photographic representations of racial types revealed curious patterns of behavior, helping construct a powerful image of difference, while enshrining deterministic hierarchies. Although a familiar phrase, modernist race science repackaged the conception into a series of discourses predicated on positivist science. Jews' bodies, for example, were described as weak, unhealthy, and unfit for performing social duties such as military service. The descriptions acquired credibility because the very essence of human frailty – chest sizes, muscular strength, and physical incapacity – could be objectively measured and compared to "fitter" races. Anthropometric measurements helped substantiate the claim that Jews possessed smaller chests and other physical peculiarities in comparison to other racial groups.¹⁸ In Russia, as in Germany and Austria-Hungary, journalists and administrators argued routinely that narrow chest sizes and height prevented Jews from fulfilling military obligations and becoming productive soldiers.¹⁹

The social thinkers who came of age in the 1860s and 1870s—whether liberal, conservative, or Populist—embraced Darwin's principle of natural selection but rejected the Social Darwinist understanding of individualistic competition and conflict, viewing the progressive development among species and humankind in terms of mutual cooperation. To quote the famous anarchist and social thinker Petr Kropotkin, "We [Russians] see a great deal of mutual aid where Darwin and Wallace see only struggle."²⁰ One of the broader implications of this line of reasoning resulted in the valorization of environmentalism: that social conditions and not biology shaped relations among humankind, the development of normalcy, and the evolution of physical characteristics.²¹

The language of race had great appeal for Russia's scientists. Hardly any expert who kept up with the latest scholarly findings denied the existence of racial categories, even if they questioned the role that biology played in the construction of differences. In the Russian Empire,

Racism in Modern Russia

as in Central Europe and the Atlantic World, medical language about how each race experienced disease grew out of a constellation of ideas in circulation at the time.²² Following the lead of their German-Jewish counterparts, Jewish social scientists, for instance, relied on the power of numbers to construct a powerful counter narrative to the racially deterministic model. “The majority of [medical] experts consider Jews the most nervous people in the world,” an entry read in the *Jewish Encyclopedia* on nervous and psychological illnesses.²³ Jewish social scientists, hoping to revise theories of Jewish essentialism, came to the conclusion that the Jewish race, always shaped by environmental factors, was prone to hysteria, neurasthenia, and epilepsy, among other medical disorders.

What made Jews so susceptible to the disorders? Experts put forward a broad spectrum of sociological explanations—from climate and economy to culture and hygiene—which contributed to the racial peculiarities. Parents forced children to study in dark and unhygienic primary schools, causing children to develop degenerative states of mind, while prolonged exposure to social and economic isolation played no small role in fostering the abnormalities.²⁴ Significantly, Jewish social scientists did not disagree with the statistical evidence, but they nevertheless came up with their own explanations for the apparent differences. It turned out that the distancing from biological laws of development did not isolate the Russian scientific community from the worldwide debates concerning nature and nurture. Russian social scientists shared their skepticism about the determinism of heredity with many of their colleagues abroad. Stressing the importance of the forces of evolution, or neo-Lamarckism, they believed in the ability of all races to progress.²⁵

In Russia, as in Europe and North America, physical anthropology emerged as a respected academic discipline in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The ethnographic division of the Russian Geographical Society – as well as Moscow University’s Society of Admirers of Natural Science, Ethnography, and Anthropology (founded in 1863) and Kazan University’s Society of Archaeology, History, and Ethnography (founded in 1878) – served as important predecessors to the rise of the anthropological profession. One of the

founders of Russian anthropology, Anatolii Petrovich Bogdanov was influenced by none other than Paul Broca, the ambitious polygenist professor of anatomy at the Faculté de Médecine in Paris. Bogdanov took craniometrical measurements of skulls, which he personally excavated from Moscow cemeteries, to demonstrate the biological reality of racial types. He organized a highly successful exhibition that displayed many of Russia's anthropological, archaeological, and ethnographic collections in Moscow University's Museum of Anthropology.²⁶

Over the years, Bogdanov also helped train some of the most brilliant anthropologists, including Anuchin, who played a formative role in establishing the Moscow school of physical anthropology. Both men read widely in the international theoretical literature on race and human development, participated in conferences and workshops in Europe, and played no small role in establishing anthropology as a distinct profession with an international reputation. The Department of Anthropology was first established in 1876 at Moscow University. The Ministry of Education refused to include the discipline of anthropology in the 1884 university statute and, instead, created a department of geography. As a newly appointed professor of geography, Anuchin did not let institutional politics deter him from his intellectual commitments. Anuchin continued the work that he had begun under Bogdanov's supervision: conducting anthropological research and reading lectures on physical anthropology, the history of anthropology, the origins of man, and ethnology.²⁷

In contrast to German anthropology's provincial worldliness, Russian anthropology was marked by an imperial regionalism – the preoccupation with the vast territories, peoples, and cultures of the empire.²⁸ Some of the most influential studies were published in Moscow University's *Russkii antropologicheskii zhurnal* (Russian Anthropological Journal, founded in 1900). Dissertations on non-Russian peoples were written at the St. Petersburg Military Medical Academy. Although St. Petersburg and Moscow played important roles in scientific research, Russian anthropologists were deeply attentive to conducting research across the vast spaces of the empire. The fascination with local cultures provided the impetus to establish

Racism in Modern Russia

ethnographic and archaeological museums in the provinces. Kazan, Kharkov, and Kiev emerged as important centers for production of anthropological research. Designed to display the empire's regional identities, museums popped up in places such as Novgorod, Vladimir, Samara, Astrakhan, Vladikavkaz, Kherson, Ekaterinoslav, and Minsk.

For the anthropologists, the empire's unparalleled diversity consumed and at the same time complicated the work. "The ethnic composition of Russia's population is distinguished by an astonishing physical as well as cultural diversity," the anthropologist Aleksei Arsenëvich Ivanovskii wrote in a review article of *inorodtsy*, "which we do not find in any West European country." "All the ethnic groups and all the tribes develop their own particular racial characteristics [*razlichnye chelovecheskie rasy*]," he argued.²⁹ The physical traits, Ivanovskii insisted, could be distinguished by skin color, the shape of the head, and the distinctiveness of the face.

Jewish Exceptionalism?

Russian anthropology's concern with non-Russians – their experiences, cultures, and physical characteristics – shaped the scientific program. The territories of the empire and its diverse populations constituted one of the world's richest laboratories for anthropological investigations. "In these vast territories reside many physical types, with diverse lifestyles and different stages of cultural development," Anuchin wrote. "Comparative anthropological analysis should help explain the racial composition of the populations, establish their types, and allow the researcher to make comparisons with similar peoples of the world."³⁰ Anuchin lamented, however, that Russian anthropologists could not make the kinds of empirical comparisons that their German and French counterparts were able to make. Whereas their colleagues abroad made comparisons based on "objective," or numerical, indices, Russia's anthropologists relied mostly on descriptive observations originally compiled by ethnographers and linguists. "Regardless of our achievements," Ivanovskii wrote in 1902, "the anthropological

profession finds itself in a preparatory stage; the collection of materials is far from adequate for making a systematic classification of the empire's multiethnic population."³¹

In spite of the inadequacies, Ivanovskii proceeded to create a classificatory map of Russia's racial groups. Although much raw statistical data had been collected, the materials had not been collectively ordered, processed, or analyzed. "Without a doubt," Ivanovskii began his study entitled "An Attempt at the Classification of the Population of Russia," "one of the most significant impediments to the development of Russian anthropology is the absence of systematized, collected data." Ivanovskii wanted to create a preliminary typology based on ten indices that could be easily measured and compared: (1) color of hair and eyes, (2) height, (3) size of head, (4) cranial measurements, (5) absolute length of face, (6) nose, (7) size of torso, (8) width of chest, (9) size of arms, (10) size of legs.³²

Ivanovskii hoped to isolate the racial characteristics that would allow him to compare populations. To his surprise, he found it difficult to distinguish one ethnic group from another based on a particular physical trait or racial purity. Based on a wealth of scientific measurements, he concluded that the indices did not isolate the empire's populations but blended them together. Belarusians, for example, could not be easily distinguished from Ukrainians or Poles, Azerbaijani Tatars from Kurds, or Kalmyks from Iakuts. But he did find one exception: the Jews. Jews confounded anthropological thinking. "On the whole," he wrote, "Jews form a complete and an entirely isolated anthropological type not joined to any other [racial] group." Even if the claim was based on a small sample, Ivanovskii conceded, the data suggested that Jews formed a distinct race. By the color of the hair and eyes, the Jew constituted a dark racial type; by the size of the body, the Jew was deemed unusually small; and by the length of the chest, the Jew was viewed as sickly, weak, and underdeveloped. Cranial measurements – the gold standard in rigorous quantitative analysis – revealed that a statistically significant number of Jews were brachycephalic (or round-headed), a trait usually equated with primitive European inhabitants rather than the more progressive dolichocephalic (or long-headed) peoples.³³

Racism in Modern Russia

Numerous other studies confirmed that Jews constituted a unique, biologically pure race. The anthropologist A. D. El'kind observed that, "regardless of the geographic territory in which they reside, Jews can be more or less distinguished by their anthropometric and physiognomic characteristics."³⁴ The most unique physical characteristic of the Jews was the brain. In a highly detailed comparative study, the anthropologist R. L. Vainberg showed that "Jews belong to those peoples with comparatively small brains" that do not conform to either "normal" or "typical" human brains. The structural composition of the Jewish brain was closer to that of the less developed peoples (as opposed, for instance, to Slavs who possessed larger-sized brains). The Jewish brain, moreover, weighed less than that of the more civilized peoples.³⁵ In his dissertation on the Jews of Mogilev province, written at the Military Medical Academy, Mikhail Georgievich Iakovenko made a similar observation regarding the biological purity of Jews. Iakovenko demonstrated that Jews could be easily distinguished by their nose (specifically their nostrils, which were categorized as type two nostrility due to the irregular extensions of the nostril passages that divided sharply at the tip of the nose).³⁶

The language of race science made its appearance in Russia toward the end of the nineteenth century. Russia's scientific experts, journalists, and medical doctors read, reviewed, and critiqued the literature in academic journals and mass circulation periodicals. They engaged in heated discussions concerning the role that environmental or biological factors (and sometimes a strange mixture of the two) played in producing physiological peculiarities, social deviance and pathology, and criminal behavior. While participating in the discussions, Russia's race scientists usually distanced themselves from crude biological thought. Acknowledging the limits of social-scientific research, they called for more data to comprehend the role that environment, intermarriage, and biology, among many other factors, played in the construction of racial types – reservations they shared with other race scientists in England, Germany, and France, where intense debates ensued over the efficacy of race as an explanatory category.³⁷

Although Russia's scientific community did not add a qualitative dimension to their arguments, it did not take long for mass consumer culture to repackage a highly academic discourse to the public. Ideas, however, are not self-contained entities. They take on new forms and functions as they are transmitted into people's minds.³⁸ How were beliefs in human differences expressed in the subjective dimensions of social relations? What role did visual imagery play in stirring up racist thought and behavior? How did stereotypes, common perceptions, and visual representations affirm collective prejudices? It is to an examination of these questions – or how ideas in fixed or absolute differences played out in policy, behavior, and daily life – that we now turn.