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CHAPTER 2

BOUNDARIES OF EXCLUSION

What was the most straightforward way of distinguishing a Pole from a Russian or a Russian from a Jew? Imperial authorities, in their efforts to maintain clear distinctions between populations, were particularly interested in preserving order and stability. Since Russia's westward expansion in the eighteenth century, administrators viewed the western borderlands with a deep sense of weakness and suspicion. During the reign of Tsar Alexander II (1855–81), paternalist thinking resulted in a host of measures designed to protect Russian peasants from the more resourceful Germans, Poles, and Jews. To expedite adaptation to Russian norms and language, Alexander II adopted a policy of gradual administrative and cultural Russification. Although the most zealous Russifiers could not agree on the exact terms, they usually pointed out that the essence of Russianness had something to do with language and religion and that Russification was a gradual process, taking one or more generations to complete. One of the most pressing concerns was the establishment of Russian as the official language in bureaucracy and schools. Other areas of reform included elevating the dominant position of the Orthodox Church vis-à-vis other Christian confessions, while bringing municipal and judicial institutions into a greater degree of conformity with those of European Russia.¹

Following the assassination of his father, on March 1, 1881, Tsar Alexander III (1881–94) sought to work out a new political model for Russian autocratic rule. The political conservatism of Alexander III's reign marked the appearance of an exclusionary imperial racism in all walks of political life. As a deep pessimism gripped the empire, Alexander III and his advisers decided to dig deeper than their predecessors. The disorders following the assassination

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of Tsar Alexander II, including outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence in the southwestern borderlands, offered the new emperor the occasion to repudiate the gradualism of the previous reign. To embolden the principle of ethnic supremacy of the Russian majority, Alexander III subjugated non-Russian populations to forceful Russification practices, bolstered the powers of the police, and implemented measures to identify and segregate populations by ethno-racial markers.²

The Jewish Problem

In the western borderlands, ethnic minorities, including Poles and, to a lesser extent, Ukrainians, suffered as a consequence of the state's reactionary policies, but it was the Jewish problem that took center stage. Much like perceptions of Blacks in the United States and in European colonial empires, anti-Jewish images became a universal feature of governmental policy and public opinion: Jews, it was reasoned, threatened to undermine, perhaps even destroy, the social order from within.

Public opinion lamented that the Jewish race possessed characteristics which would not allow them to assimilate. "What the Jews were, so they shall remain," the conservative *Novoe vremia* (The New Times) opined. Even the liberal *Golos* (The Voice) felt that "the Semitic race, for all its aptitudes, possesses many qualities which make it far from a sympathetic object for [ethnic] Russians."³ Some of the fears corresponded to the general paranoia that crossed international borders; others were grounded in the realities of imperial Russian history (by the remarkable participation of Jews in radical and revolutionary movements). That the majority of the political criminals came from the empire's western borderlands and that a high percentage of all those sentenced happened to be Jewish only reinforced the fears that Jews threatened the prosperity and tranquility of the empire.⁴

By the last decades of the nineteenth century, Jews constituted an unmistakable presence in public life and were drawn to some of the fastest growing cities in the empire, including Kiev, Odessa, St. Petersburg, and Moscow. Jews were overly represented in gymnasia

and universities, in law and medicine, and in music schools and the visual arts. They dominated commercial life, tax-farming, small-scale trade, manufacturing industries, sugar mills, and gold mines.⁵ Partly as a response to the growing visibility of Jews, public opinion accepted the pernicious claim that Jews posed a direct economic threat to Russian society. According to minister of interior Count Nikolai Pavlovich Ignatiev, the most urgent duty of the government was to take measures to “safeguard” the native population from the harmful activity of the Jews.

Ignatiev served as the chief architect of temporary legislative measures known as the May Laws, ratified on May 3, 1882. By forbidding Jewish residence outside urban settlements and carrying on trade on Sundays and the twelve major feasts of the Orthodox Church, the May Laws attempted to draw a distinct line between Jews and their Christian neighbors. With nearly 600,000 individuals targeted for expulsion, Jews became objects of frequent roundups, abuse, and police surveillance.⁶ Segregationist policies did not create an absolute divide between Jews and peasants or towns and villages. But together with the quota system, designed to limit the number of Jews in institutions of public education and the free professions, discussed in more detail later, the state’s expulsion policies made life frustratingly difficult for Jewish communities.

Imperial law placed undue burdens on Jewish mobility. A mosaic of complex statutes prohibited Jews from residing in places except those that were delineated in the law codes. Initially, the Pale of Settlement was designed not to segregate Jews, but to confine Jews to the fifteen western provinces. The idea was to contain Jews in a region where they had lived prior to the partitions of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.⁷ But during the Great Reform era, as Russia underwent remarkable economic growth, and as certain groups such as merchants of the first and second guild, students in institutions of higher education, and select artisans received the right to reside in the heartland of the empire, the laws associated with the delineation of the Pale of Settlement came to symbolize the most repressive of Tsarist policies.

In the 1870s and 1880s, the passport statutes proved especially onerous for Jewish daily life. One journalist remarked, in 1877, that

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no other European capital had such harsh laws that constrained where Jews could live and how long they could travel. “Upon birth a Jew is deprived of the freedom to move and the right to choose a place of residence—the most basic of all individual and civil rights—rights which all other subjects of the empire enjoy, with the exception of Jews.”⁸ In St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Kiev, authorities carried out sweeps of neighborhoods in search of illegal migrants, expelling Jews for not practicing the occupation listed in their residence papers or for acquiring a fictitious social identity. Over the years, Jews endured numerous financial hardships and lasting psychological damage as a consequence of the state’s passport laws. Reactionary newspapers spread mass hysteria by publishing accounts of Jews violating passport laws and refusing to return to their permanent place of residence. Expulsions caused unprecedented fear and violence, but they did not resemble mass ethnic cleansing practices, or the total removal of a population by ethnic criteria. The Russian government had no intention of keeping Jews in one place—of making the Pale of Settlement an ethnically pure space.

Just as the concept of the racially fixed Jew started to acquire popular resonance, the boundaries between Jews and everyone else became increasingly difficult to police. By changing names, mores, and religion, Jews were able to erase or in some cases conceal some of the most prominent symbols of their identities, making it difficult to know who was Jewish and where Jews were. The illegibility of Jews did not go unnoticed. The search for a dependable indicator of Jewishness led in different directions. Religion and language no longer served as dependable markers of identity. In the spirit of elevating Russianness, bureaucrats came up with creative ways to mark Jews as a distinctive population. In St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Warsaw, police officials required Jewish merchants to display forenames, patronymics, and surnames on all privately owned shops. The Ministry of the Interior and the Holy Synod spent considerable energy compiling an exhaustive book of “Jewish” names—to help determine who exactly was Jewish by making sure that Yiddish diminutives, Hebrew biblical, and Russian names were spelled correctly in vital statistic books, censuses, and passports.⁹

Conservative critics, in the 1870s and beyond, painted a dark picture of the visibility of Jews and other ethnic minorities in institutions of higher education. A highly influential letter to the editor of *Novoe vremia* entitled “The Kike is Coming!” warned that Jews were on the verge of dominating “not only [commercial and financial] professions, but also the so-called liberal professions,” allowing them to command immense material and intellectual power.¹⁰ The public debate over the number of Jews in higher education intensified after the pogroms of 1881 and 1882 and the student unrest of the 1880s. Both Jews and other ethnic minorities such as Poles were subjected to ethnically based quotas, mostly due to fears that they would take away jobs from ethnic Russians. State-sanctioned quotas limited Jewish access to public gymnasia, technical schools, and universities. At Russia’s eight universities, the quota of Jewish students ranged from 3 percent in St. Petersburg and 4 percent in Moscow to 24 percent in Odessa and 27 percent in Kharkov. Private schools and academies occasionally followed suit. In Kiev, the Volodkevich Women’s Commercial School capped the number of Jewish students, while one local gymnasium forbade Jewish students from tutoring its Christian students. Quotas were also introduced for non-Russians in cadet schools, but only the Jews were banned outright.¹¹

Despite the efforts to draw social boundaries, large metropolises, as well as many smaller provincial settlements and market towns, offered an eclectic mix of people, including Russian Orthodox peasants, German colonists, Jews, Poles, and Ukrainians, among others, opportunities to socialize at marketplaces, at street fairs, and in neighborhood taverns. As part of Russia’s emerging civil society, voluntary organizations—charities, libraries, and cultural clubs—provided common space for people from different backgrounds to mix, forge partnerships, and cooperate on some level.

The few Black Americans who lived and worked in imperial Russia commented that they could pursue whatever likelihoods they chose. Frederick Bruce Thompson—also known as Fyodor Fyodorovich Tomas—grew up in the Deep South in the Reconstruction Era. His travels took him to Chicago, New York, and across the Atlantic to England and France. Eventually, Frederick entered Russia and rose to

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prominence in Moscow's theater world. Before the cataclysmic events of 1917 toppled the old order, Frederick owned two of Moscow's celebrated nightclubs, making millions in today's money. His mixed-race children attended one of the elite schools in the country. For Frederick, as for Russia's tiny colony of Black residents, race did not appear to be an issue.¹²

Yet, for certain despised groups a noticeable shift occurred in the ways in which hierarchies were drawn and inequalities were justified. Following the abortive Polish rebellion of 1863, officials became increasingly fearful of Catholicism and of Poles spreading harmful ideas in Russian institutions. More than 300 Catholic churches, chapels, and monasteries were shuttered. Over 300,000 Catholics were forcibly converted to Russian Orthodoxy. The regime relocated thousands of Poles from the western borderlands to Siberia. It also restored strict censorship laws, suppressed the nascent revolutionary movement, and issued new regulations to staff bureaucracies with "true Russians." M. N. Murav'ev, the governor-general of the northwest provinces, came up with bold schemes to exclude "persons of Polish origins" from civil service or teaching jobs and to cleanse the region of Poles. Alexander II did his part by ratifying restrictive decrees forbidding Polish Catholics from working as teachers in educational institutions controlled by the Ministry of Enlightenment. To combat unwelcome Polish influences, Murav'ev proposed to cap the number of students of Polish origins at no more than 10 percent.¹³

Associational life brought people together, but laws limited where Poles and especially Jews could live, work, study, and socialize. Despite the integrationist currents, Western travelers noticed that Jews were often called the Negroes of Russia. Voluntary organizations played on societal fears, segregating populations by religion and, increasingly, ethno-racial origins (*proiskhozhdenie*). Both Jews and baptized Jews were targeted disproportionately for abuse. The restrictive laws multiplied at the turn of the twentieth century. The Congress of the United Nobility insisted on excluding Jews and Jewish converts from serving in the army, navy, and all military schools. The Union of Agrarians denied membership to Jews and baptized Jews. Municipal libraries in Berdichev and Bobruisk (where a large majority

of the population was Jewish) refused to subscribe to Jewish books and periodicals. In Kiev, populist politicians promoted legislation to limit Jewish economic opportunities, while some high-ranking administrators insisted that certain institutions such as hospitals and schools should serve only the city's Christian population.¹⁴

Conversion to Christianity lifted the formal restrictions associated with Jewishness. But as racial thinking became more pronounced and as hostilities to Jews increased, baptized Jews experienced prejudice in their daily lives. The individuals who opted to formally change their religion to Russian Orthodoxy, Catholicism, or Protestantism usually did so for strategic reasons: to receive residential privileges beyond the Pale of Settlement in cities such as Moscow or St. Petersburg, to get around official quotas in institutions of higher education, to work in the profession of their choice, or to marry a Christian spouse. Some individuals experienced difficulties in removing the signs and symbols associated with their Jewish past. Others encountered bureaucratic discrimination in public life. It did not help matters that authorities were continually preoccupied with maintaining distinctions between new converts and "real" Christians, including marking *iz evreev* (of Jewish origins) on official documents for Russian Orthodox converts.¹⁵

Ultimately, the deep cultural pessimism that gripped Russia in the fin de siècle had far-reaching consequences on day-to-day encounters. Burdened by slights, slurs, and rejections, baptized Jews found it difficult to hide their background in both their private and public lives.¹⁶ For Pavel Osipovich Eizenberg, a Russian Orthodox convert, the descriptor "of Jewish origins" in his passport not only offended his sensibilities, but it also meant that he could not easily pass as Russian.¹⁷ Sofiia Silberman, who had converted to Russian Orthodoxy to marry her Christian lover, petitioned for a similar reason: this time, to change the Jewish surnames of her children so they would not endure insulting questions in their adult lives. In the petition, she wrote that her children "suffer from ridicule and questions from their peers for carrying a Jewish surname, 'Zilberman.'" "Why," she asked, "should she suffer for sins she did not commit and constantly feel the backhanded glances of those around her?"¹⁸ The process of reinvention—of erasing the stigmas and symbols of Jewishness—proved difficult to overcome.

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The 1905 Revolution served as a major turning point in the intensification of racial prejudice. On January 9, 1905, troops set off months of revolutionary protests by shooting on a demonstration of unarmed workers. In the aftermath of Bloody Sunday, the civil order broke down. Russia experienced a massive assault on its authority, including a wave of politically motivated strikes. Adopting exclusionary language and violent means, right-wing populists argued that Russia's institutions existed solely to support "true Russians." Right-wing extremist groups benefited from the relaxed laws on voluntary associations, publishing, and expression. Militant nationalists founded clubs and organizations. They staged public protests, festivals, and rallies. Some published their own newspapers and brochures, which they used to widen their reach by peddling conspiracy theories.

In moments of crisis, right-wing organizations such as the Monarchist Russian Society, a precursor to the paramilitary organization, Black Hundreds, exhorted ethnic Russians to defend their people and territory, at the expense of Jews and other ethnic minorities:

Beat the damned traitors everywhere and all over, wherever you find them and with whatever [you can], beat the Yids, destroyers of the Russian tsardom, beat the bloodthirsty robbers in the zemstvo [local governments], beat the instigators of the sedition and strikes, beat . . . the school youth, even if he would be your son, brother, or relative, all the same he's a traitor, don't pity [him], beat him, he's a complete wretch and is the destroyer of the people and the Russian land, the more of them we destroy, the better for Russia and [for] the people, the more of them we kill, the less sedition there will be in Russia and Russia will be on the path of redemption.¹⁹

The right-wing movement—with more than 300,000 active members—thrived in cities and towns with sizeable Jewish populations. Diverse in their ideological stance and social profile, paramilitary groups received protection from powerful local officials. The Black Hundreds threatened and occasionally unleashed violence

Image 2.1 Postcard featuring the Union of the Russian People, the most popular of the organizations promoting extreme-right ideologies. Founded in 1905, the organization was known for its anti-Semitic and Russocentric doctrines and strong support of the autocracy. © Courtesy of Popperfoto via Getty Images.

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on Jewish communities in Odessa and Kishinev. In Kiev, anti-liberal populists described pogroms as an act of resistance by people aligned with “truly Russian” interests against Jewish economic exploitation and revolutionary subversion.²⁰ The Union of the Russian People, the largest, most influential right-wing organization in the empire with more than 800 branches in existence in 1907, acquired a broad following by skillfully manipulating mass media. The organization disseminated thousands of flyers; its main newspaper, *Russkoe znamia* (The Russian Banner), had a daily circulation of between 12,000 and 15,000 copies.²¹

It is well known that Nicholas II (1894–1917) cozied up to right-wing extremists, but newly discovered archival evidence suggests that some of these groups received support through secret channels from the highest reaches of the bureaucracy, including the Ministries of Finance and Interior, to subsidize publishing efforts, organize congresses, and purchase guns. One of the most prominent associations, the Kiev Club of Russian Nationalists, with some 600 members, expanded its base by drawing on long-standing tropes of Polish and Jewish exploitation. At one of the club’s events, Ivan A. Sikorskii, a professor of psychiatry at St. Vladimir University, described the ongoing tensions in the borderlands as a racial war between Jews and Poles against the “Aryan” East Slavs.²²

The uptick in anti-Jewish violence and microaggressions occurred in the midst of explosive labor unrest and of rising concern about crime. If in 1904 there were sixty-eight strikes in which less than 25,000 workers took part, a year later, the numbers surged to nearly 14,000 with more than 2.86 million participants.²³ Many sectors experienced profound politicization. The mass circulation press expanded dramatically in this period, from 123 newspapers in 1898 to more than 1,150 in 1913 and from some 1,000 magazines and journals in 1900 to over 3,000 in 1914.²⁴ Commentators, on all sides of the political spectrum, characterized the age in exceptionally bleak terms.²⁵ At the height of revolutionary fervor, newspapers were filled with all sorts of crime stories, from petty theft, mugging, prostitution, and domestic violence to organized crime run by powerful, well-connected rings. Odessa gained a reputation as the empire’s criminal

capital, although the intensity of the urban violence was on display in many other settings, as well. What started out as mass fistfights could easily evolve into massive public brawls and riots, involving thousands of people (as it did in St. Petersburg), resulting in extensive damage to entire neighborhoods, including shops, theaters, parks, and restaurants.²⁶

The brutality of anti-Jewish violence easily surpassed that of earlier incidents. Over the course of two years, in 1905 and 1906, nearly 660 pogroms broke out in the Pale of Settlement, resulting in more than 3,100 Jewish deaths and a colossal 57 million rubles of damage to Jewish property. The populations that deemed themselves as superior applied force on the basis of group membership. Rioters expressed pent-up emotions by blaming Jews for societal ills. Although the violence against Jews was not engineered from above by high-ranking officials, it is hard to absolve provincial authorities from responsibility. In Odessa and many other sites of anti-Jewish violence, pogromist agitators spread wild rumors of Jews fomenting social disorders and slaughtering Christian residents with abandon. Local officials, for their part, often failed to adopt adequate countermeasures, suppress false rumors and propaganda, and contain popular rage from spiraling out of control.²⁷

The figure of the Jew was featured prominently in Russian popular culture. Reactionary journalists, politicians, and paramilitary organizations, including the Black Hundreds, circulated images of Jews – with thick lips, oversized eyes, hooked noses, and long, dark hair—sucking the blood of mother Russia, plotting an international conspiracy of domination. Numerous ideologically tainted discourses, including the language of race science, helped define the Jewish problem. Satirical journals, lowbrow magazines, journalism, and postcards all published cartoons that portrayed Jews with stereotypical features. The images showcased were crude, commonplace, and not all that remarkable in and of themselves. Similar unflattering depictions of Jews circulated throughout Europe and across the Atlantic. Their importance lay largely in the symbolic and emotional realms—by providing the public a script: that the Jew was the chief source of Russia's problems.²⁸

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The Yellow Peril

On the opposite end of the empire, in the far-eastern zone—an expansive, sparsely populated territory of more than 1,200,000 square miles bordering northeast China—the population that sparked similar apprehensions was the East Asians or “yellows,” as they were wont to be called.²⁹ The commonalities between anti-Jewish thinking and anti-Asian prejudice were many, as journalists, business leaders, and Tsarist officials remarked in public forums. Fears of occupation, economic dominance and entrapment, legal controls, and demographic decline all provoked everyday violence and discrimination in both the far-western borderlands (toward Jews and Poles) and the far-eastern periphery (toward Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese).³⁰ Accusations of exploitation—the buying and reselling of goods at excessive profit—followed a similar pattern for both Chinese and Jewish traders and entrepreneurs. “The Chinese,” a journalist writing for the *Sibirskii vestnik* (The Siberian Herald) noted, “are playing a similar role on our eastern frontier as the Jews in our western borderlands, with all of the same consequences.”³¹

By 1860, Russia extended its influence in the Far East, establishing the Amur and Ussuri rivers as the new border with China. Eastward expansion created new opportunities for cultural contacts between Russia’s subjects and Asiatic peoples. Between 1885 and 1913, around five million subjects crossed the Urals to settle in Asiatic Russia. Local officials and statisticians usually categorized this population—comprised of ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Latvians, Germans, and a handful of Jews—simply as “Russians.” They came to colonize sparsely inhabited land, to trade goods and merchandise, and to participate in large-scale mining and railway construction projects.³²

Along the far-eastern border, Russian officials perceived Chinese and Korean labor migrants as a distinct threat to the geopolitical stability of the state and the development of its economic interests, even as an unusually high percentage of foreigners were hired for their low cost of labor. In the mid-1880s, the Chinese constituted approximately a third of the population in the Amur and the Ussuri regions. Some were nomadic peoples of mixed Chinese-Manchu

origin. The vast majority (mostly men) were skilled and unskilled day laborers. By the first decade of the twentieth century, as many as 550,000 Chinese entered the Russian Empire, while tens of thousands of Koreans traveled back and forth across the far-eastern border. Most East Asian migrants came to work in the gold mines, timber, railroad construction, petty trade, and fishing.³³

The arrival of Chinese laborers followed similar patterns to those of the United States and the British colony of Victoria. In their attempts to regulate the flow of populations, Russian officials were guided, in large part, by California's policies on Chinese immigration. In the 1880s, America's race prejudices portrayed the Chinese as distinct threats to the health and prosperity of the nation. As a result, thousands of Chinese labor migrants in America were singled out for exclusion based on race. The violence that followed reconfigured American gatekeeping and dramatically expanded the surveillance of the United States border.³⁴ The Russian government took notice. Over the years, Russia experimented with an assortment of border control methods—from taxes and permits to passports and population quotas. As in America and other places around the world, the efforts to control the border were fueled by sensational media depictions of cunning, dirty, and deceitful Asian migrants.³⁵

Large numbers of Chinese and Korean migrants crossed the expansive far-eastern border. On the Russian side of the border, it did not take long for the Chinese to establish a complex of shops, restaurants, and small businesses, including entire quarters, helping fuel a rapidly expanding labor market. Border towns—from Khabarovsk and Vladivostok to Nikolsk, Blagoveshchensk, and Chita—were populated by Chinese farmers, merchants, peddlers, tradesmen, and seasonal laborers. The Chinese dominated gold mines, shipyards, and the railway. They managed most shops and river piers; provided a market for furs, ginseng, antlers, grain, fruits, dry goods, and vegetables; transported contraband and exotic powders across state lines, including opium; and performed essential unskilled labor. At the turn of the twentieth century, census takers determined that eight out of ten diggers were Chinese, as were nine out of ten workers in the shipyards and nearly all the laborers on the Ussuri Line, the Chinese Eastern Railroad, and the Amur Line.³⁶

Image 2.2 A photograph of Chinese railway workers eating lunch. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Chinese had become a vital presence on the Russian side of the border. © Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons.

Chita, the capital of the Transbaikal, was one of the most developed cities in Siberia, with a population of approximately 50,000 people. It served as an important junction of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, with a direct trunk line to the Chinese border. With thousands of workers traveling back and forth across the border each year, Chita developed into one of the most vibrant transportation hubs in the region. The visibility of the yellow race did not go unnoticed. Chinese shops and stands on street corners were a common sight in the city. One provincial newspaper observed that the “Chinese have flooded the entire Amur border and are heading further and further [in land]. In Chita, Japanese laundry mats and photography studios have surfaced; [and] the Chinese have taken over digging in the gold mines.”³⁷

The construction of the Chinese Eastern Railroad—a project that helped establish Russia’s colonial sphere of influence in Manchuria –

stimulated economic development by making trade faster and cheaper from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean. To promote economic interests, Russia abolished, temporarily, the principle of free trade in the territories east of Lake Baikal. Customs posts popped up, but it was nearly impossible to control cross-border movement or to stop the illicit transfer of commodities. Silk, tobacco, and liquor were among the most popular contraband items. Gold, in particular, smuggled from Russia to China by train, horseback, or on a boat, involved a complex network of smugglers, diggers, and traffickers with ties to world markets.³⁸

Russian officials attempted to control the Sino-Russian border by stationing patrol agents and instituting customs points and passport requirements. Predictably, the eastern border proved challenging to police. Chinese migrants traveled back and forth, with the pace of migration increasing exponentially with the building of the Chinese Eastern Railroad. Russian customs officials and border patrol agents tried to expel unregistered workers, but experienced guides procured counterfeit passports and circumvented check points. The physical descriptions on the passports—"black hair," "brown eyes," and "short stature"—described most East Asian border crossers.³⁹

Chinese and Koreans incited racist fears, not least because of their numbers. S. M. Dukhovskoi, appointed as the Amur governor-general in 1893, was one of many officials who feared that Chinese communities stained the map of the far-east zone an indelible yellow. The idea that East Asians were yellow, dangerous, and discernibly inferior took hold in the western imagination toward the end of nineteenth century. All around the globe, fears of the yellow race were usually attributed to a spike in the unchecked immigration of East Asians, the specter of military aggression, and economic exploitation.⁴⁰ Ever since Russian travelers and military and government officials began to take an interest in the Far East, they had no qualms in expressing their innate racial superiority vis-à-vis the yellows. Nikolai Przhevalskii, for instance, considered the Europeans a morally superior race in comparison with the "degraded inhabitants of Asia." Travels along the borderland left a particularly disagreeable impression on the influential geographer. Comparing the Chinese to the Jews, Przhevalskii observed that the

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“Chinaman here is a Jew plus a Muscovite pickpocket both squared,” and lamented the occasions he witnessed “Europeans being polite to this rabble.”⁴¹

The threat of Asia’s enormous population—and its deleterious influences—preoccupied many other high-ranking officials as well. The finance minister Sergei Witte conceived of the Chinese Eastern Railroad as a tool to bring together “the yellow and white races” and “open a gate for Europe into a hitherto closed off world.” Much like Leland Stanford, California’s first Republican governor and president of the Central Pacific Railroad, Witte deemed Chinese workers as essential for achieving national greatness. But Witte also shared Stanford’s racist sentiments. Rather than promoting integration, Witte cautioned that Russia should direct a form of segregated cohabitation between the yellow and white races.⁴² The prime minister, Petr Stolypin, worried that a state without firm borders would cease to be a foreign power. “If we sleep our lethargic dreams,” he warned in remarks to the Duma, the far-eastern “territories will become saturated with foreign juices, and when we awake, perhaps they will be Russian only in name.”⁴³

The Japanese victory over Russia in 1905 and the prospect of losing control of the Far East intensified anxieties with regard to the yellow race. Yielding an outburst of forceful reactions in the popular press, the war destabilized preconceived hierarchies. In the international arena, news agencies described the event as the first victory of the yellow race over a white people and a Christian Western empire. W. E. B. Du Bois, the influential writer and American civil rights activist, framed the war as a transformative moment in the upending of the global color line. Writing in the *Collier’s Weekly*, Du Bois observed that, “for the first time in a thousand years a great white nation has measured arms with a colored nation and has been found wanting.” Russia’s disastrous defeat marked a sudden shift in the “hegemony of civilization” and the “awakening of the yellow races.” The “magic of the word ‘white’ is already broken,” Du Bois boldly asserted, and “the Color Line in civilization has been crossed.”⁴⁴

Russian newspapers on all sides of the political spectrum, from highbrow literary journals to the penny press intended for lower-class

readers, devoted much space to covering the events, as well. But they depicted Russia's crushing defeat in the Far East largely in unflattering terms.⁴⁵ Both Tsar Nicholas II (1894–1917) and Aleksei Kuropatkin, commander-in-chief of the Russian forces, called the Japanese “short-tailed monkeys.” Images of the inferior, dehumanized East Asian foe, with semi-civilized blood, threatening national security, appeared in cartoons, posters, and popular wartime prints (*lubki*). It was not uncommon for the Japanese to be associated with animals such as monkeys, rodents, or dogs. The weak, slant-eyed, yellow-skinned Japanese, standing in stark opposition to the culturally superior white-skinned Russian, acquired enormous cultural capital.⁴⁶

In the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War, fears of the yellow race took on heightened proportions. To allay national security concerns, mine owners experimented with race-based quotas on yellow labor, capping the number of Chinese and Korean workers at

Image 2.3 Cossacks searching for Japanese spies in a Manchurian village. The Russo-Japanese War, 1904–5, began on January 26, when Japan launched a surprise attack on Port Arthur. Approximately 31,600 Russians and 49,400 Japanese died during the war, which marked the first defeat of a major European imperialist power by an Asian nation. © Courtesy of Photo12/Universal Images Group via Getty Images.

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no more than 50 percent. It turned out, they soon learned, that the supply of Russian labor was not sufficient to keep up with the rapid economic expansion of the region. So Russian administrators invited thousands of coolies (who were paid a fraction of what Russian laborers earned) to work in the gold mines and on the railway. Desperate for cheap labor, Russian landlords and factory owners did not bother with proper paperwork. The number of Chinese workers in the gold mines increased from nearly 6,000 in 1905 to 30,400 in 1909. The Chinese played an outsized role in the expansion of the gold industry. They were also blamed for “crowding out” Russian labor and faced constant threats of expulsion. Local race prejudices widely acknowledged that cheap Chinese labor diminished product quality and posed a competitive threat to Russian workers. The Chinese, one official explained, “prey on [Russian labor]. The only thing they are concerned with is seizing as much gold as they can, as quickly as possible.” The fact that the Chinese allegedly violated rules, disregarded safety procedures, and smuggled gold extracts across the border posed special problems for mine owners. “If there weren’t any Chinese laborers in the gold mines,” the same official concluded, “the work on the mines would proceed differently,” according to a unique set of rules, as more civilized ethnic Russians gradually settled the land.⁴⁷

In the Russian Far East, as in the United States’ Far West, tens of thousands of male workers crossed the border to work in the gold mines, on farms, and on large-scale railroad projects. Little information exists about their day-to-day experiences and identities. In mines and railroads, the Chinese performed unusually strenuous work: shoveling, wheeling, and blasting rocks around the clock under challenging conditions. They endured onerous legal restrictions, racial taunts and abuse, and occasional violence—all for a fraction of the price that Russian workers commanded.⁴⁸ In the first decade of the twentieth century, and especially after the start of the Great War, the demand for Chinese and Korean labor surged in the Far East. And so did ugly racial prejudices. Pavel Unterberger, the governor-general of the Amur, blamed Russia’s dependence on yellow labor for developing “idleness and drunkenness” and other bad habits. Newspapers featured

sensational, often frightening, accounts of alarming descriptions of yellow labor migrants crossing the eastern border in “waves.”⁴⁹

Raw statistics did little to allay popular racial fears. In the Amur, the total number of Chinese gold miners in the workforce increased from 43 percent in 1905 to 81 percent in 1909. Administrators—without worrying about the impact on Russian economic interests—called for the expulsion of all East Asian workers without proper travel documents or residence permits. Legislation limited or attempted to prohibit the employment of yellow labor in industries and businesses. On June 21, 1910, the Duma—without specifying Chinese and Koreans directly—restricted state enterprises from hiring foreign workers. After the plague broke out in Manchuria in 1910, and subsequently spread along the railroad network, some officials lobbied to seal the Amur region entirely, on the basis that Chinese seasonal workers bore direct responsibility for bringing the deadly disease across the border. If a hard-line approach to immigration proved unrealistic to implement, the same officials requested to set up quarantine stations: to detain the Chinese for a minimum of ten days to inspect clothing, luggage, and other belongings for infectious disease. The quarantine stations segregated populations along ethnic or racial lines, with the Chinese sealed off from white Europeans or ethnic Russians in ghetto-like quarters.⁵⁰

Despite the prohibition on yellow labor, trainloads of Chinese workers continued to cross the eastern border each month to perform essential services on farms, docks, factories, construction sites, railways, and gold mines. Patrol agents estimated that 2,236 Chinese labor migrants crossed the border in February 1914 and an additional 1,702 the following month. Nikolai L'iudvigovich Gondatti, the new governor-general of Amur, was obsessed with the idea of expelling alien labor. Sharing the view with other officials that the “Far East zone must be Russian and only for the Russians,” he came to the conclusion that Chinese workers “brought nothing but harm.” Due to their racial peculiarities, the Chinese saw the world differently than Russian workers and Europeans generally, with little understanding of society's legal norms and elementary sanitary standards. Undoubtedly, Gondatti observed, Chinese workers posed a public health risk by

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infecting Russians with infectious disease.⁵¹ But with a labor shortage of at least four million men, the Council of Ministers on July 30, 1915, saw no choice but to ease work restrictions for Chinese and Koreans, at least on a temporary basis, irrespective of the widespread belief circulating in high-ranking circles that the yellow race was dangerous, dirty, and inassimilable.⁵²

The Mass Influence of Race

Racial violence, on both the western and eastern borders of the empire, took place in the context of profound social dislocations, the appearance of exclusionary nationalist sentiment, and the rise of respectable race science. In late imperial Russia, a wide range of historical actors—from respected journalists and writers such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Vasilii Rozanov, and Vladimir Jabotinsky to imperial administrators, journalists, and the most zealous anti-Semitic hacks—used words and images infused with racial idioms.⁵³ The anxieties—to say nothing of the attempts to draw hierarchies between populations—operated in a global framework, but they were always shaped by local preoccupations and power dynamics.

At the turn of the twentieth century, government officials and professional elites working in the fields of statistics, public health, crime, and disease control were not immune to the tremendous influence of racialized medical science. Some of Russia's leading scientists engaged in ideas associated with population genetics and the eugenics movement that became fashionable in liberal European settings (progressive eugenics) as well as in reactionary environments (negative eugenics). Professor Iurii Aleksandrovich Filipchenko, for instance, lectured at St. Petersburg University on Mendelian genetics, biometrics, and mutation theory, and published several well-received articles and textbooks.⁵⁴ The Ministry of the Interior was not impervious to the latest breakthroughs in criminal science infused with the language of race. In an attempt to confront recidivism and political terrorism, it relied on the techniques established by Alphonse Bertillon to detect criminals based on anthropometric

measurements of the body and forensic photography. The Bertillon system was premised on the principle that all human measurements were racially fixed and obeyed statistical norms. In their descriptions of the criminal body, police officials were instructed to pay particular attention to physiognomic indicators that served as important clues to criminal identity: nose, mouth, and race or skin color.⁵⁵

No event better illustrates the wider resonance of ideas—rooted in racial or quasi-racial language—than the sensational Beilis case. The issue of Jewish criminality, including the blood libel, had been adjudicated by Russia's courts before, but no previous case had a clear racial element. The trial of Mendel Beilis in September 1913 for the murder of Andrei Iushchinskii, a thirteen-year-old Christian boy, gave a public platform to voices operating at the margins of society. In March 1911, Iushchinskii's body was discovered in a cave in Kiev's Lukianovka district, punctured with numerous stab wounds in the head and upper torso. The corpse was drained of vast quantities of blood. It did not take long for rumors to circulate that the Jews had committed the crime as a blood ritual to bake matzo. Organizations with deep loyalty to the monarchy and an intense interest in promulgating conspiracy theories and zealous anti-Semitism picked up on the case. *Dvuglavyi orel* (The Double-Headed Eagle), a newspaper operated by a radical right student youth league, proclaimed that "there is no doubt whatsoever that we have here a case of ritual murder carried out by the kikes," and that the murder was part of a racial conspiracy to destroy the "weak, helpless, and oppressed" Russian Orthodox masses.⁵⁶

What was once regarded as an irrational obsession associated with medieval times, the Jewish ritual murder accusation found new life in nineteenth-century Europe, including Russia. As other high-profile ritual murder trials in Central Europe, the drama of the Beilis case played out in the open courtroom, informed by modern legal and criminal norms and the language of science.⁵⁷ The outspoken psychiatrist Sikorskii served as one of the star witnesses for the prosecution. Over the years, Sikorskii had acquired a reputation as a prominent public intellectual and an expert in the field of race science. His writings were often marked by excessive, unusually tasteless rhetoric. In his numerous publications—from his analysis of the

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poet Aleksandr Pushkin's blackness to his work on the Russian race-nation—Sikorskii placed Jews at the very bottom of a racial hierarchy, equating them with American “Negro elements,” whose racial peculiarity was characterized by a wild instinct and crude sensuality.⁵⁸

After examining Iushchinskii's body, Sikorskii determined that the murder was an act of Jewish “racial vengeance.” At the trial, Sikorskii went further by proclaiming that the ritual murder of Christian children would continue while “there is agitation by races that nourish savagery among their members and while we [Christians] are unable to take measures to liberate ourselves from them.”⁵⁹ It did not take long for the trial to erupt in an international cause célèbre, where Sikorskii's expert scientific analysis of the boy's body, as well as other aspects of the case, were made public. Although the jury eventually absolved Beilis of the crime, it nevertheless determined that the murder was committed with ritual intent. Special correspondents writing for newspapers around the world—from the esteemed *New York Times* and *Times of London* to the widely disseminated *Novoe vremia* and the extreme-right press—reported on every detail of the case, including the jury's ambiguous verdict. While the *Times of London* and many other papers in Russia and the United States denounced the split decision, the *Dvuglavyi orel* rejoiced: “The torturers of Christian children exult, but [the Jews'] criminality has been proven with exhaustive clarity in court.”⁶⁰

Several months after the jury handed down its verdict in the Beilis case, Russia entered World War I. The mass violence had far-reaching repercussions in daily life. In Russia, as in Britain and Germany, the war intensified racial prejudices already evident in the prewar years. With more than ten million men conscripted in 1914 and 1915, the Great War had disastrous consequences for Russia's farms, factories, and industries, including on the Sino-Russian frontier. At a time of radical emergency, Poles, Germans, Chinese, and Jews all suffered denunciations for their alleged disloyalty to the imperial Russian state. More than 400,000 Jews served in the armed forces, but top military officials and the radical right agitated to banish Jews from the military ranks for their “unusually harmful” ways. It was not uncommon for military officials to describe Jews as “weak,” “prone to bribery,” and

“disloyal.”⁶¹ The army used its vast powers to launch campaigns against suspected enemy aliens and spies. Jews, Germans, and Chinese were subject to unusually cruel attacks, including mass deportations and arrests, accompanied by widespread rumors of disloyalty.⁶² Under direct orders from the General Staff, the Russian army deported as many as half a million Jews from the eastern front, including large regions of the northwestern parts of the Pale of Settlement. The mass ethnic deportations were often accompanied by looting, rioting, rape, and murder.

As a deep conservatism gripped Russian culture and politics, Jews emerged as the most visible threat to the health and prosperity of the imperial Russian nation. Yet, to argue that Jews proved to be *the* exception in an otherwise tolerant imperial order is to overlook the very problematic meanings of Russianness and the ways in which differences were constructed, defined, and maintained. Various other populations, including Poles, Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese, experienced similar frustrations, burdens, and attacks due to their perceived differences. Race science offered what appeared to be an objective rationale to keep dangerous and inferior groups in their place. This does not mean that the concept of race—a notoriously slippery, malleable construct—always carried the day, inspired collective action, or superseded religious or economic formulations (it did not). But considerable evidence exists that, as the empire crumbled under its own weight, racial thinking began to filter down to the public by way of a complex system of signs, symbols, and ideas.