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CHAPTER 4

WHITE RAGE

Russia's post-Soviet transition resulted in poverty, pain, and a shared sense of loss. Unchecked inflation and food shortages caused most Russians to feel that the country was descending into chaos and anarchy. People lined up for forty to sixty-eight hours per month on average to purchase basic foodstuffs. By April 1991, meat and butter rarely showed up in stores; when they did, prices surged by 300 percent or more. The rest of the decade proved no better. Currency devaluations, culminating in the 1998 market crash, and a staggering 13.2 percent unemployment rate (between 1994 and 1998), added to the perception that relative stability had become a thing of the past. In the anemic economic climate of the 1990s, even as living standards stabilized, most people fell below the poverty line at least once. As Russia's unofficial economy and retail trade took off, so did the unequal distribution of income. In 1997, the ten richest Russians controlled 3.5 percent of the country's GDP, but the poverty rate nearly doubled as a result of the 1998 financial crisis.¹

No less troubling was Russia's mortality crisis. No other industrialized nation at peace experienced such a steep loss in population, which declined by roughly two million in eight years (from 148.5 in 1992 to 146.5 in 2000). A combination of factors, including excessive alcohol consumption, drug dependency, and a rise in psychological stress and suicide resulted in the sharp drop. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, Russia's suicide rate spiked to its highest in many decades; the fertility rate plunged to among the lowest in the world. The rise in mortality, especially among middle-aged ethnic Russian men, the population that suffered the most, heightened personal vulnerability, contributing to the uncertainties in everyday life. In 1993, life expectancy for males dropped below sixty years, and

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remained at that level for many years thereafter. In 1994, a twenty-year-old Russian male had only a one in two chance of surviving to age sixty; the death rate of working-age males was approximately four times that of US males.²

In all, the recovery rates were so slow that experts predicted that the population decline would continue for decades to come. At the turn of the new millennium, some demographers spoke of “an unprecedented pace of deterioration in a country not at war.”³ Other public health professionals claimed that Russia had descended into a full-blown demographic crisis, predicting that the country’s population would eventually fall to less than 100 million, if policy makers failed to take bold steps to rectify the problem. In his first annual address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation in July 2000, Vladimir Putin characterized the population question as “one of the most alarming that the country faces.” “We, the citizens of Russia, are becoming fewer and fewer with each passing year,” he remarked. Putin estimated that Russia’s population had dropped by an average of 750,000 annually since the collapse of the Soviet Union. If the mortality rates remained constant, the number of Russian citizens would drop by 22 million by 2015. “I would ask you to think this figure over,” Putin told his audience. “We really do face the threat of becoming an enfeebled nation.”⁴

Adding fuel to the fire was the precipitous decline of the ethnic Russian majority. According to the 2010 census, the number of ethnic Russians (relative to the population as a whole) had fallen from 81.5 percent, or 119.9 million, in 1989, to 77.7 percent, or 111 million, in 2010. The decline of the ethnic Russian majority occurred as the share of non-Russians, especially from the Caucasus and Central Asia, accelerated. For decades, Soviet social scientists charted the discrepancy in the birth rates among ageing Slavs in the heartland and young people from the Caucasus and Central Asia, the poorest of the Soviet republics. Journalists and television commentators picked up on the jarring statistical trends, warning of the social dangers that Tatars, Bashkirs, Chechens, Kabards, Ingush, and a host of other dark-skinned groups such as Avars, Dargins, and Kumyks posed to Russian cultural values.⁵

White Power Violence

Just as Russia was experiencing an epidemic of “deaths of despair,” violence—directed at Chechens, Jews, Africans, Central Asians, and Roma—surged.⁶ One leading expert claimed that, in the new millennium, Russia had become a racial tinderbox, “the most dangerous country for racist violence in the world.”⁷ Over the course of eighteen years, between 2000 and 2017, at least 458 people died as a result of extremist crimes and thousands more were beaten or wounded. In the mid-1990s, a diverse right-wing movement came on the scene in cities such as Moscow, Voronezh, Riazan, Tiumen, Rostov-on-Don, and St. Petersburg. By 2007, Russia was home to some 60,000 to 65,000 skinheads. Armed with weapons and explosives, militant gangs such as Combat-18, the Nationalist Socialist Society, the Brotherhood of Skins, the Slavic Union, and the Aryan Brotherhood identified themselves as defenders of the great white race. White power extremists organized training camps and knife-fighting sessions, with the explicit goal of preserving the white Russian nation from foreigners and dark-skinned minorities.⁸

It is hard to provide an overarching explanation for the upsurge of racial violence and xenophobic attitudes. A multiplicity of factors—the uneven state of the economic recovery, including Russia’s own “deaths of despair,” a lack of confidence in Putin’s policies, as well as anxieties over the influx of migrant populations from the southern border—set the stage for racial strife.⁹ White power extremists capitalized on Russia’s social and political upheavals to recruit new members, relying on the internet to spread their message and to publish videos of violent exploits and paramilitary training sessions. They livestreamed grisly attacks, masterminded misinformation campaigns, and shared racist memes, video clips, propaganda, and manuals. More than 100 newspapers and at least seven publishing houses peddled extremist views. White power militants organized robust rallies to spread their message to the public, most famously on National Unity Day (commemorated on November 4, beginning in 2005). But it was the online spaces, including fringe social-media websites and digital platforms, that allowed right-wing militancy to

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thrive. Over 800 websites openly promoted hate crimes, cultivated new members, spurred right-wing activism, and spread conspiracy theories, far-right disinformation campaigns, and hateful rhetoric.¹⁰

White power violence played out in a tumultuous social and political context of post-Soviet Russia, but it always spoke to larger global historical forces, events, and ideas. Participating in a global culture of hate, right-wing extremists expressed exclusionary fantasies rooted in the superiority of whiteness. The slogan “white power,” in Russia and elsewhere around the world, served as the rallying cry. Some militants wore tactical boots, shaved their heads, and tattooed their bodies with neo-pagan symbols; many others grew their hair and looked like other “hard-working, kind-hearted kids.”¹¹ Activists played on societal fears by claiming that dark-skinned migrants posed a demographic threat to the white Russian majority. “The Russian people are dying; we are being degraded by other races. It’s time for someone to say enough,

Image 4.1 Extremist-nationalists, shouting “Russia for the Russians,” “Moscow for the Muscovites,” and other white power slogans, marching on Unity Day in the southeastern outskirts of Moscow on November 4, 2013. About 10,000 Russian nationalists gathered across Moscow in an annual show of anger against the presence of Muslim migrants. © Courtesy of Vasily Maximov/AFP via Getty Images.

and for us to stand and fight,” Dmitry Diumushkin, the founder of the extreme nationalist group Slavic Union, proclaimed.¹²

In a world filled with alcohol, drugs, and laundered money, white power activists typically congregated in high-rise, low-income apartment buildings or abandoned construction projects on the outskirts of cities. But they also hung out in bars such as the Grease Club on Malaia Ordynka Street, decorated wall-to-wall with American confederate flags, only a few blocks from the Tretiakov Gallery in the very center of Moscow.¹³ One manifesto summed up the existential threat, affirming that Russia’s extremists “are white warriors” or “soldiers of their race and nation,” who stand on the front lines of a global racial war, “fighting every day for the future of the white race and the happiness of their people.”¹⁴

A crude, paranoid anti-Semitism resurfaced. Anti-Semitic references appeared regularly in periodicals, magazines, television shows, and newspapers, even though a tiny Jewish community remained in the Russian Federation, with most Jews emigrating to North America and Israel. The Anti-Defamation Committee of the Russian-Jewish Congress classified nearly 200 newspapers as openly anti-Semitic. A pollster for the All-Union Center for the Study of Public Opinion remarked, “The fewer Jews there are in Russia, the more they talk about them.” Russian politicians such as the Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov blamed the “current catastrophic conditions of the country” on the global conspiracy of Jews, while *Pamiat’* (Memory) and other ultra-nationalist groups embraced conspiratorial thinking, calling for the destruction of Jewish monuments and violence toward Jews. Skinheads vandalized Jewish graveyards, synagogues, and community centers; inscribed swastikas and stars of David on gravestones; and erected anti-Semitic signs such as “Jews, return to your homeland.”¹⁵

Far-right extremism emerged as a powerful social phenomenon. The number of right-wing attacks in Russia was five times more than in the United States and four times more than in Germany and twice more than in Sweden (the two countries with the highest right-wing militancy in Western Europe). Activists committed violence in the name of an all-white ethnic Russian nation. “A skinhead,” one

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extremist member testified in a court of law, “is a person who loves their nation. To affirm our love for the nation, I, together with other skinheads, went to football matches, went to fight with the fans of other football teams, and beat people of non-Slavic appearance.”¹⁶

Discriminatory attitudes on the grounds of race became a fact of life for anyone who did not “look typically ethnic Russian,” according to the Amnesty International.¹⁷ The violence took on a number of different forms: from xenophobic slurs to knife attacks, premeditated murders, and full-blown riots, involving hundreds of attackers and causing massive amounts of property damage to shopping centers and outdoor fruit and vegetable markets. On streets, trolleybuses, and subways, skinheads sowed discord: harassing and attacking, often with fatal consequences, Africans, Koreans, Central Asians, Caucasians, Roma, and children of mixed ethnic parentage. “I know that skinheads attack people who do not look Russian, and I am not Russian,” an Armenian student recalled. “You can see that in my appearance. I’ve got dark hair and brown eyes. All nationalities have distinct characteristics such as Armenians, Georgians, or Adyghians. . . . It doesn’t matter really, but they only attack non-Russians.”¹⁸

In the new millennium, a wave of grisly hate crimes made for international headlines. Media outlets reported of hundreds of racist attacks on ethnic minorities, with some 800 hate crimes occurring in 2005 alone. In July 2002, at a summer picnic in Moscow, ten Russian men assaulted a group of African students, refugees, and asylum-seekers, shouting “white power” and other racist slogans. The picnickers stopped a police patrol car, but the officer refused to help, claiming that the area was beyond his jurisdiction. When new officers arrived on the scene, instead of filing a report, they accused the picnickers of instigating the attack and proceeded to inspect identity papers, before taking the young men for further questioning to a nearby police station.¹⁹

In February 2004, in another high-profile case, a gang of teenagers used an assortment of weapons—knuckledusters, chains, sticks, and knives—to attack a Tajik family in the courtyard of an apartment building. Shouting “Russia for the Russians,” the gang repeatedly stabbed Khrusheda Sultanova, a nine-year-old girl, and proceeded to

beat up her father and her eleven-year-old cousin. Khrusheda died of excessive blood loss. Her father sustained nonthreatening head injuries, while her cousin saved her life by hiding underneath a nearby car. And in April 2006, a member of the right-wing organization Mad Crowd, shouting Nazi slogans, attacked a group of African students in the center of St. Petersburg, on the doorsteps of African Unity, a cultural organization founded with the mission of promoting tolerance and friendship among Russians and foreigners. The attacker shot to death a Senegalese student named Samba Lampsar but managed to run away before the police could apprehend him. The shotgun, decorated with a swastika and the inscription “white power,” was found at the scene of the crime.²⁰

As right-wing extremism escalated, human rights organizations began to take notice. In June 2006, Doudou Diène, the United Nations special rapporteur on racism, visited Moscow and St. Petersburg on an inspection tour. In his report to the Human Rights Council, Diène observed that “Russian society is facing an alarming trend of racism and xenophobia, the most striking manifestations of which are the increasing number of racially motivated crimes and attacks, including by neo-Nazi groups, particularly against people of non-Slav appearance originating in the Caucasus, Africa, Asia, or the Arab world.” All sorts of people, from different regions of the Russian Federation, were drawn to the mass movement. “The average skinhead profile is no longer that of a socially disadvantaged and uneducated youth,” Diène declared, “but rather a teenager—increasingly often a minor—from a middle-class family with secondary, higher, or technical education.” In most cases, members were in their teens or early twenties, with girls and young women participating in the violence, as well.²¹

White power groups such as the National Socialist Society advocated revolutionary terrorism not only to sow discord—although they did that and more—but to create an opposition movement to destabilize the very foundations of the state. In this respect, there was nothing particularly unusual in the ideas and attributes that shaped extremist violence in the New Russia. White power activists from America to Germany and Australia saw the state largely in adversarial terms. “We realized that we’re living in an occupied state—that our homeland is

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currently in enemy hands,” one Russian extremist explained. “The regime of Putin, the chekists, and the FSB has seized power, and those who speak out against them are locked away in prison and killed.”²²

Moscow looked to the white power movement as a potentially useful tool for galvanizing support among its base of supporters. Law enforcement agencies often turned a blind eye to extremist violence—particularly when it came to attacks against dark-skinned minorities. But Putin drew a red line when far-right mobilization infringed on the power of the state. The Kremlin expressed no tolerance for extremist violence that undermined or destabilized the state’s governing structures.

Still, there is little doubt that Putin’s authoritarian politics made it possible for white militarism to flourish. Putin’s administration not only supported the European Far Right—by most famously underwriting the activities of the Front National in France—but also provided a model for white nationalist rule all around the world.²³ “Putin has said that everyone should feel at home here, and that is of course welcome [sic],” proclaimed Petr Indogeno, the general secretary of African Students at the Russian University of Peoples’ Friendship of Russia, “But we want to feel safe, not at home.”²⁴ The ideological vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet Union created what Diène described as a “cocktail,” or a “culture favorable to the emergence of groups of individuals and of political parties that have used the racist and xenophobic platform as its main discourse.”²⁵ Amnesty International and other human rights organizations have repeatedly characterized Moscow’s response to racism as “grossly inadequate.”²⁶ The Ministry of Justice and the Supreme Court may have prohibited the registration of organizations with extremist platforms, including, in a 2005 landmark decision, Rodina, the fourth largest political party. Authorities may have convicted several high-profile groups of hate crimes. But by routinely classifying xenophobic attacks as “hooliganism”—a petty crime payable by a small fine—rather than as racially motivated hate crimes, the legal system helped fuel racism, while law enforcement officers routinely ignored or covered up racial discrimination, particularly when directed at dark-skinned populations from the southern border.

The Southern Border

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Yeltsin and other government officials were reluctant to define the Russian Federation exclusively in ethnic Russian terms, and continued to refer to Russia as a multicultural and multireligious entity. By law, Russian citizenship did not depend on ethnicity or language but on civic loyalty. Nonethnic Russians represented around 20 percent of the population. Ukrainians and Belarusians—considered fellow Slavs by temperament, appearance, and civilization—formed significant minorities, while the Finno-Ugric populations and the peoples of Siberia and the Far North spoke mostly Russian, practiced a form of Eastern Orthodoxy, and did not differentiate themselves all that much from ethnic Russians. The biggest threat to Russian cultural dominance came from the southern border: the traditionally Muslim populations from the Caucasus and Central Asia whose skin and hair color, physiognomy, language, cultural expressions, and occupations reinforced common perceptions of difference.²⁷

When Chechnya, a predominantly Muslim republic, located in an obscure mountainous region of the North Caucasus, declared national independence, the Russian armed forces unleashed unusually destructive attacks. The first war in Chechnya was fought in the name of preserving Russia's territorial integrity. In no uncertain terms, the military maneuvers, between 1994 and 1996, were considered an abject failure, resulting in an abrupt cease-fire and the demoralization of Russian troops. The second war in Chechnya, beginning in September 1999, played a central role in the consolidation of Putin's political power.

Putin did his best to avoid Yeltsin's follies. Putin's political legitimacy rested, in large part, on restoring Russia's vigor. When a series of explosions destroyed apartment buildings in Moscow, causing widespread panic, he calmed the public, famously declaring in September 1999, "We will go after them [i.e., gangs of foreign mercenaries and terrorists, or Chechens and other dark-skinned peoples from the Caucasus], wherever they are. If, pardon me, we find them in the toilet, we will waste them in the outhouse."²⁸ Between his

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assuming power in 2000 and his reelection to a third presidential term in 2012 and beyond, Putin remade Russia squarely in the image of an all-dominant white male. Showcasing youth and machismo, Putin supported rebuilding a strong centralized state, vowing to protect the population from domestic terrorism and political anarchy. He paid lip service to Russia's multiethnic and multireligious heritage—to the antiquated “friendship of people” metaphor—and elevated ethnic Russianness to the dominant status.

Purposefully avoiding the terms “ethnic conflict” and “racial war,” Putin framed the Chechen campaign as an anti-terrorist operation, fought against well-trained international saboteurs who undermined Russia's national security. In an address to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in 2001, the foreign minister, Igor Ivanov, declared that nationalism does not exist in Russia, a multinational state. “Any isolated manifestations of unwelcome nationalism that occur are dealt with appropriately. In no way do we consider the conflict to be interethnic or religious.”²⁹

The second war in Chechnya caused some 75,000 civilian deaths, although the precise figure is impossible to determine with certainty (the Russian government banned journalists and human rights monitors from traveling to the region). Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, suffered extensive damage to its infrastructure, including to telephone, electricity, and gas lines, water reservoirs, bridges and roads, and the airport. Russian armed forces committed extensive human rights abuses. Sweep operations terrorized civilians, resulting in summary executions, including sexual violence toward Chechen women. Torture—mock executions, electric shock, and genital beatings—turned into official state policy, encouraged by military leaders not only to gather sensitive information but also to humiliate the victims.

As the armed forces left Grozny and surrounding towns and villages in ruins, Moscow conducted a particularly virulent propaganda campaign. Television broadcasts and newspaper articles labeled Chechens as international terrorists, the lowest form of humanity. In popular and military language, racial prejudice easily mixed with anti-terrorist ideology to justify the extreme violence. Referring to

Chechens as “apes,” “bandits,” and “blacks,” soldiers exerted force with impunity. Some 250,000 displaced Chechen civilians fled the war zone. Most went by car, trucks, or on foot to the neighboring republic of Ingushetia, others traveled longer distances to Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey, and a steady stream of migrants departed the economically depressed region for Moscow and other cities in the heartland of the Russian Federation.

Determined to keep Chechens in their place, military leaders sought to control the mass exodus of displaced persons. The Russian government refused to grant Chechen civilians the status of internally displaced persons through the Federal Law on Forced Migrants, which meant, among other things, that forced migrants did not have access to health care, employment, or the right to establish residence in cities and towns in the Russian Federation outside their place of origin. Some politicians such as Yuri Luzhkov, the mayor of Moscow, hoped that a concrete barrier around Chechnya, similar to the Berlin Wall, would protect Russians from terrorists.³⁰

A “wall of separation” around Chechnya never got built. But a messy and overly bureaucratic system of migration controls expedited the harassment of ethnic minorities. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow abolished the notorious passport-*propiska* system. Article 27 of the 1993 Russian Federation Constitution guaranteed people the right to move around the country and to choose a place of residence, either on a permanent or temporary basis, while the internal passport, a required document, no longer bore the holder’s ethnicity. But even as Moscow liberalized the laws on mobility, it displayed little tolerance for integrating non-Slavic populations. The policy of visa-free entry, on a ninety-day limit, made it easy for citizens of the Commonwealth of Independent Post-Soviet states (CIS) to cross the sprawling Russian border. The system, however, did not provide work authorization, and the highly cumbersome bureaucratic procedures wound up creating disincentives for employers to comply with the letter of the law.³¹

Between 1992 and 2006, more than 11 million people migrated to the Russian Federation from post-Soviet states—with the share of ethnic Russians steadily declining over the years. By the turn of

Image 4.2 A photograph taken on October 25, 2013, showing migrant workers in a fenced holding area outside Moscow's Federal Migration Service office, waiting to receive a work permit. © Courtesy of Vasily Maximov/AFP via Getty Images.

the twenty-first century, an estimated 4.5 million undocumented migrants (mostly from Central Asia and the Caucasus) resided in Russia proper. The presence of dark-skinned populations from the southern peripheries—Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Moldova, and other former Soviet republics, as well as the troublesome regions of the North Caucasus (part of the Russian Federation)—altered the urban landscape. As in the last decades of the Soviet Union, this population (often stigmatized as “blacks,” or *chernye*, due to their appearance, speech, and behavior) operated at the margins of society.³²

Members of the dominant Russian society looked at non-Slavic migrants from the peripheries as racial outsiders. Anyone who looked or spoke differently could be labeled as “black.” “They see a non-Russian face,” one Armenian student from Krasnodar remarked, “and call them either Adyghean or Armenian, whatever suits them. Everyone is lumped together under one nationality.” Non-Slavs acquired a lowly status. They concentrated in particular professions and trades. Some individuals, including Roma, worked

in construction, road repair, wholesale markets, hotels, and restaurants. Many others drove taxis and buses, cleaned sidewalks and apartment buildings, operated vegetable and fresh fruit stands, and hawked vodka, scarves, and cheap earrings in outdoor bazaars and pedestrian underpasses. One Kelderari Roma welder remarked to an American researcher: “All Russians care about is whether you’re black or white . . . we are negry. We are treated like a second class here, like your blacks in America.”³³

The federal laws on mobility—and the enforcement mechanisms—turned increasingly harsher as Putin ramped up the second campaign in Chechnya. Moscow considered migrants—and especially peoples of non-Slavic origin—a burden on the city’s resources. In the early 2000s, authorities subjected dark-skinned populations to endless episodes of harassment, most of which had something to do with the laws on movement and residence: arbitrary inspections of documents, including requests for proof of employment; refusal to certify residence registration; denial of medical care; imposition of burdensome fines and fees; and demands for bribes. Random checks of individuals of “non-Slavic appearance” became a common feature of urban life. The statement “They are turning Moscow into a little Caucasus” and other racially charged headlines regularly appeared in the press, calling for the expulsion of undocumented southern migrants.

In his public comments, Putin warned of the destructive consequences of terrorism on Russian soil. “Local conflicts,” he reported in a 2006 address to the Federal Assembly, “remain a fertile breeding ground for terrorists, a source of their arms and a field upon which they can test their strength in practice. These conflicts often arise on ethnic grounds, often with inter-religious conflict thrown in, which is artificially fomented and manipulated by extremists of all shades.”³⁴ People from the Caucasus and Central Asia—with no connection to war-torn Chechnya—were targeted disproportionately for abuse. Anyone with a darker appearance could be stopped for a document check. It was not unusual for police officers, in the name of rooting out domestic terrorism, to profile individuals of Caucasian origins as “blacks,” particularly at metro or railway stations or in streets and on sidewalks.

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Document checks usually resulted in short two-hour detentions—which played out silently, invisibly, unpredictably—but on other occasions, police raids could lead to false drug and weapons charges and mass deportations, attracting widespread attention from journalists and human rights organizations such as the Memorial and the Amnesty International. Between 2010 and 2012, according to data compiled by the Memorial, approximately 90 percent of labor migrants reported that they or someone they knew had been harassed by police authorities. It was not unusual for police officers to confiscate passports, registration papers, and work permits, to take “foreigners” into custody without justification, to torture or insult at will, and to extort bribes. Occasionally, a document check could result in the confiscation of large sums of money and valuables, which is what happened in May 2012, when a police officer detained a citizen of Georgia, Mamuka Ts., at the Vasileostrovskaya metro station in St. Petersburg. It turned out that Mamuka was returning home—and to his bad luck, after having been paid 100,000 RUB for three months’ work. The officer not only confiscated Mamuka’s money, but also threatened to harm him if he reported the incident.³⁵

Similar encounters took place in metro stations, outdoor markets, bus stops, parks, and railway stations. One woman, a mother of four from Chechnya, recalled how two drunk Slavic-looking men called her “*chernaya*” when she came out of the metro station. “I pulled up my sleeve and said: ‘look, dumbasses, I am whiter than you.’ They continued to insult me, so I took out my pocketknife, inviting them to fight me. Cowards as [racists] often are, they retreated. I picked up my sports bag from the ground and proceeded to the minibus.” In Moscow, young male Caucasians or Central Asians below the age of thirty numbered nearly 20 percent of all metro passengers but represented 40 percent of all detainees. “They see from my face that I am not Russian, so they stop me and inquire about my circumstances, what I do here,” one student from the North Caucasus observed. Another student commented on the invisible aspects of racial sentiment: “Well, even if there is no visible hatred towards us, there are certain moments, certain places where you can feel that we are clearly not loved here [in St. Petersburg]. These problems do not exist

only [where] people study, or do something, like the arts, but on an everyday level, with [the] people that you do not know personally.”³⁶

Labor migrants resorted to a number of strategies to avoid ethnic profiling. They limited their movement or spent as little time as possible in public spaces where they could easily be identified. Some altered their appearance or refrained from wearing conspicuous clothing or accessories that drew attention to their ethnic origins. To pass for light-skinned Slavs, women colored their hair or wore European-style clothing, while men put on baseball caps to partially cover their face. Almost all migrants carried small sums of cash in case they were detained for a document check.³⁷

In interviews and public speeches, Putin continued to praise Russia's tolerance of diversity. Fast-paced events, however, shattered the perception that post-Soviet life was a brotherhood of nations—embracing all ethnic groups as equal citizens. Terrorist attacks on the Moscow metro and at the Domodedova airport, in 2010 and 2011, respectively, heightened popular resentment against non-Slavic populations. Television networks threw cold water on the “friendship of peoples” metaphor, while promoting the special status of ethnic Russians as the first among equals, and widely reproducing ethno-racial stereotypes in their coverage of crime and interethnic conflict. On talk shows, politicians such as the ultra-nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskii labeled Russia's multiethnic ideal a thing of the past, which, he claimed, had been destroyed by Dagestanis, Chechens, and other peoples from the North Caucasus. Dmitry Medvedev (who served as president of the Russian Federation from 2008 to 2012) flamed tensions by comparing Russia's “problems” with North Caucasians to what Europe experienced with migrants from North Africa and the Middle East.³⁸

Russian media, diverting criticism away from the Kremlin, played an outsized role in manufacturing ethnic prejudice. This was particularly the case with respect to an event known as the Sviridov affair—the catalyst of one of the largest demonstrations-cum-ethnic riots in post-Soviet Russia. Shortly after midnight on December 6, 2010, two youth groups (one of which was comprised of ethnic Russians, fans of the football club Spartak, and the other one of

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migrants from the North Caucasus) got into a street brawl. At some point during the fight, Aslan Cherkesov of Kabardino-Balkaria pulled out a gun and shot Yegor Sviridov in the head with a rubber bullet. The police detained Cherkesov, the primary suspect in the murder case, but released five of the accomplices. Rumors began to circulate on social media that the relatives of the North Caucasians paid a handsome bribe to the officers. The next day hundreds of football fans picketed the district prosecutor's office and proceeded to march in protest on the Leningrad Highway, blocking traffic in both directions.

Four days later, on December 11, what was planned as a peaceful memorial rally morphed into a bloody race riot. The violence took place on Manezhnaia Square, only a stone's throw away from the Kremlin and the Red Square. Officials estimated that 5,000 people took to the streets. Some sources wildly inflated the numbers, claiming that as many 50,000 people had gathered that day—a crowd comprised of journalists and police officers and a motley crew of Spartak fans, right-wing extremists of all stripes, and everyday Russians, chanting “Russia for the Russians, Moscow for the Muscovites.” One participant described the demonstration as a “racial war,” fought by Slavs against Caucasians to preserve the sanctity of the Russian nation. Others professed that the time for peaceful protest had long passed: “In case of conflict, be the first to attack—better to have three court judges sentence you, than four people carry you away. Talk is useless with animals; a beast only understands force . . . to walk without a knife or a gun is criminal negligence.” Walking in the direction of the Lenin Library, a mob of rioters chanted anti-immigrant and anti-police slogans, raised their hands in Nazi salute, and attacked randomly people of “non-Slavic appearance.”³⁹

The Sviridov affair mobilized group solidarity in unexpected ways. Both Putin and Dmitry Medvedev singled out their support for racist actions. In a highly symbolic gesture, Putin, in his capacity as prime minister, laid a wreath on Sviridov's grave, vowing to enact tougher immigration measures. Medvedev, backtracking his original comments, went even further, claiming that there was nothing wrong with elevating ethnic Russians as the first among equals. After all, Medvedev pointed out, “ethnic Russians are the majority in our

country. Russian is the state language. The Russian Orthodox Church is the largest religion in our country.” It was these characteristics, Medvedev asserted, that comprised the unique makeup of the Russian character. “This is fine, and we should not be afraid to say this.”⁴⁰

In the wake of Sviridov’s death, demonstrations followed in cities across the Russian Federation—from St. Petersburg and Novosibirsk to the southern port city of Rostov-on-Don, where protestors shouted, “Rostov is an [ethnic] Russian city.” Police authorities, blaming the mayhem in Moscow on “left-radical youth” and the problems arising from the criminal behavior of unintegrated minorities and migrants, minimized the role that racist ideologies played in inciting the violence. Predictably, state-sponsored media downplayed the role of popular racial sentiment, although at least one weekly news program spoke of the “epidemics of inter-ethnic conflicts,” before attributing the violence to criminal elements from the North Caucasus.⁴¹

As the Sviridov event and its aftermath unfolded, it became increasingly clear that the mass demonstrations—and the public affirmation of white consciousness—were not solely the work of right-wing nationalists or a group of disenfranchised maniacs. An express poll taken by a popular radio station in Moscow revealed that 87 percent of the listeners supported the mass demonstrations. Similar polls revealed that an overwhelming majority of Russian citizens expressed support for the demonstrations, while calling for “greater rights” for ethnic Russians.⁴² To put it in slightly different terms, the people who took to the streets in December 2010 to voice their displeasure at dark-skinned masses from Russia’s southern periphery were part of a broad social movement.

“Slavs Only”

On May 7, 2012, Vladimir Putin stepped outside of a black Mercedes and walked along a bright red carpet and up a swirling marble staircase. As he stepped foot through heavy gilded doors inside the Andreevski Hall of the Grand Kremlin Palace, a crowd of 3,000 guests greeted the straight-faced Putin with warm applause. The guest list at

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the inauguration ceremony included the nation's top military leaders and cabinet members, alongside the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, and dignitaries such as Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin's widow, Naina, and Putin's longtime friends, the former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi and former Chancellor of Germany Gerhard Schröder. Putin's rarely seen wife Liudmila made an appearance as well. Placing his hand on a red leather-bound copy of the constitution, Putin swore to respect and protect human and civil rights and freedoms. *The Guardian* declared that Putin assumed his third term as Russian president in an "inauguration fit for a king."⁴³

As an extravagant dinner party began, groups of boisterous activists took to Moscow's streets to protest the legitimacy of the election. Riot police in camouflage arrested hundreds of people that evening, including the most visible protest leaders, Boris Nemtsov and Alexei Navalny. Anyone wearing a white ribbon, the symbol of protest adopted by anti-Putin activists, was detained and given an official warning. The specter of mass political mobilization—and the highly unfavorable international press coverage—tarred Putin's carefully constructed image of legitimacy. In the aftermath of the inauguration, the Duma passed a whirlwind of restrictive laws to help deflate mass protests and to promote a patriotic-nationalist agenda. As Putin began his third term, mass political mobilization—when thousands of ordinary Russians called attention to election irregularities, abuses of human rights, and civil and political violations—had become a thing of the past.⁴⁴

For right-wing extremists, the mobilization campaigns of 2012 presented a unique opportunity: to legitimize their marginal status by entering the arena of mass politics in direct opposition to the Kremlin. The odd pairing of right-wing extremists and staunchly pro-democratic activists did not garner much support from either side. Right-wing extremists denounced joint actions with "despised liberals and leftists." In fact, shortly after realizing the futility of influencing state power, most right-wing groups abandoned large-scale protest activity. They went underground, plotting in tight-knit cells the work of a white power revolution. That year, extremist violence continued without interruption, targeting dark-skinned individuals and anyone

who did not look “Slavic,” particularly at rock and hip-hop concerts, football matches, and other boisterous events that drew large crowds. According to the Sova Center, a leading think tank on racism in post-Soviet Russia, nineteen people died and 187 sustained injuries as a result of right-wing extremist violence.⁴⁵

Raw statistics, however, obscure more than they reveal about the prevalence of racist or exclusionary thinking in ordinary lives. Most ethnic Russians—comprising 80 percent of the population in the Russian Federation according to the 2010 census—did not fully articulate far-right exclusionary and dehumanizing ideologies. They did not indulge in explicit racial fantasies, couched in suggestive or coded language, to protect the homeland from immigration threats or demographic decline. But as Putin embraced a conservative-nationalist agenda, ideas operating on the fringe of society gradually moved to the realm of acceptable discourse.

The elevation of whiteness took place against the backdrop of a conservative turn in Russian politics and society: the normalization of sexism and homophobia in popular consciousness, the strengthening of “traditional family values,” and the regulation of family and reproductive behavior. Among other things, biopolitical interventionism provided authorities a set of powerful tools to delineate belonging.⁴⁶ The idea of whiteness—and the meanings attached to how white ethnic Russians perceived themselves and those around them resonated powerfully in a variety of different settings: in TV broadcasts and popular jokes, magazine and newspaper advertisements, and the internet; in official and unofficial government practices; and in popular rhetoric, norms, and customs.

Researchers studying ethnic discrimination in post-Soviet Russia have concluded that, while support for white supremacist groups remained low, xenophobic attitudes were unusually widespread, with men more prone to negative, xenophobic feelings than women. In the labor market, especially in Moscow and St. Petersburg, employers consistently preferred to hire applicants with Russified or Europeanized names (as opposed to people whose names were easily recognizable as Caucasian or Central Asian). In the world of popular culture, images of blackness proliferated—with that of Barack Obama

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one of the most widely circulated. Racist memes and joke culture consistently portrayed Obama as an ape, holding or eating a banana. The crude, filthy visuals of Obama's Black physicality not only colored the forms of the hostility and oppression against him, but also spoke broadly of how the cultural imagination created and reproduced white privilege.⁴⁷

The dominance of whiteness was on wide display in the race-conscious "Slavs Only" (tol'ko slavianam) job advertisements and apartment and room listings as well. One ad for a vacancy at a Moscow café requested that applicants have "at least one year's experience, friendly personality, and a Slavic appearance."⁴⁸ The Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow made international headlines when it listed "Slavic appearance" as a requirement for a barista opening.⁴⁹ Most ethnic disclaimers, however, were reserved for apartment advertisements. A typical listing stipulated that the landowner would

consider Slavic people only, without pets and small children. It's possible [to rent the apartment] to a friendly, normal group of co-workers from the same firm or who hail from the same city or village. If four or five men [would like to live together], you have nothing to worry about. The most important thing is to look Slavic.⁵⁰

Landlords did not always agree on who was a "Slav" or, for that matter, on who qualified as a citizen of the Russian Federation. Sometimes Belarussians and Ukrainians did not fit the requirement. On other occasions, Moscow landlords confused an individual from, say, Cheliabinsk (the Urals in the Russian Federation) with a labor migrant from Kyrgyzstan. But even with all the uncertainty swirling around definitions, most Russian landlords agreed that people with darker, Caucasian, or Asian features or easily identifiable ethnic names and accents need not apply.

According to an analysis of 32,000 apartment advertisements made by *Novaia gazeta* (New Newspaper), 14 percent of listings in Moscow included the disclaimers "Citizens of the Russian Federation," "Russians Only," and "Slavs Only." In St. Petersburg, the numbers came

out lower at around 4 percent, while in Novosibirsk, Samara, Kazan, Nizhnii Novgorod, and Ekaterinburg they totaled at 5 percent. Another study, focusing on Moscow and paying close attention to geography, arrived at a similar conclusion, finding that the highest rates of ethnic discrimination took place in the poorest districts of Moscow, where landlords typically charged the lowest monthly payments for rooms or apartments. Severny, in the northern tip of Moscow, was the capital's most racist neighborhood, with 58 percent of all landlords restricting tenants by Slavic origins. Kapotnia, Vnukovo, and Pechatniki were not too far behind, with approximately 50 percent of all landlords including the ethnic disclaimer in ads.⁵¹

The apartment listings with "Slavs Only" disclaimers delineated the color line by writing race directly on the body. These markers highlight the challenges and pressures immigrant groups faced in successfully adapting to white mainstream society. Eva Mizrabekyan, who moved to Moscow from Azerbaijan in the late 1990s when her Armenian husband found work at a restaurant, described the difficulties of finding a rental property. "My husband is light-skinned, so sometimes we wouldn't have any problems right away if he went to see the apartment alone," Mizrabekyan said. "But when it was time to sign the agreement the landlord would find out our name and start cursing and would either try to raise the price or back out altogether." Emil Allakhverdiev, an English teacher of Azerbaijani origins, told a journalist that it was not "just the disclaimers that you see in one out of three ads," but also the real estate agents who "hang up the phone" when they hear your last name.⁵²

Real estate agencies defended the practice. "It's not discrimination," one real estate agent insisted in an interview with a journalist. "The goal is to prevent migrant workers from Central Asia and southern Russian republics from turning apartments into 'hostels.'" ⁵³ Most ordinary Russians supported the practice as well. "I will tell you why we advertise it here like that," one internet user posted a message in a chat group. "The thing to consider is the reputation of the migrants from the CIS—namely, Kazakhs, Tajiks, Uzbeks, etc. No one wants to rent apartments to them not because they don't respect these nationalities, but because they don't want their apartments torn to

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Image 4.3 The percentage of Moscow apartment listings, by neighborhood, which specify the race of potential tenants. According to data compiled by the Robustory project, the most discriminatory neighborhoods were located furthest from the city center, with the lowest property prices. Using the real estate website Cian.ru, Robustory compiled data based on 35,796 listings on April 2, 2017. © Courtesy of Vladimir Avetian.

pieces. Instead of the one or two people named in the lease agreement, they bring an entire crowd [to live in the apartment].”⁵⁴

Putin’s administration did not go so far as to implement racial discrimination as official government policy inscribed in law. It did not limit interethnic exchanges or institute practices of segregation in eating places, hotels, theaters, airport waiting rooms, lavatories, schools, and drinking fountains. It did not impose systematic public policies that explicitly segregated the renting or buying of housing.

But it also did not have to go to those extremes. The Russian Constitution guaranteed equal rights and freedoms regardless of sex, race, nationality, property and official status, and place of residence. Article 136 of the Criminal Code outlined a range of hefty fines for violations, while the Labor Code prohibited discrimination in the workplace based on age, sex, ethnicity, religion, or beliefs.⁵⁵ Despite these abstract safeguards, the post-Soviet state created an elaborate “web of discrimination” touching many aspects of daily life. In Putin’s Russia, racial hierarchies—the distinctions between “black” and “white”—were maintained by social convention rather than by legal practices. Unofficial practices in hiring and housing—the tacit agreement of not offering employment or, more frequently, not renting apartments to people of color—exposed racial fault lines, establishing and preserving inequalities.⁵⁶

The category of Russianness underwent a profound transformation over the years. For decades, the Soviet regime shaped group consciousness around a rich corpus of myths, legends, heroes, and imagery drawn from Soviet Russia’s national past. In a society rooted in class and proletarian internationalist values, Bolshevik propaganda conflated “Soviet” with “Russian” sentiments, however paradoxical the pairing may have appeared to outside observers. The efforts were so successful that generations of Russian-speaking schoolchildren, factory workers, bureaucrats, and soldiers in the Soviet Union defined their collective identity—and imagined their place in the federative community—in terms of Russianness. To be sure, Russocentric populist imagery and rhetoric continued to bind people together long after 1991. But at the turn of the twenty-first century, an important shift took place in how ethnic Russians viewed themselves and the world around them: not only in terms of national-historical symbols, myths, and legends, but also through the prism of race and whiteness.⁵⁷

Russianness and whiteness mutually reinforced one another and were often juxtaposed to blackness.⁵⁸ “Slavs Only” disclaimers and other race markers played a powerful role in drawing boundaries around populations by a combination of features such as speech, behavior, appearance, and skin color. As Russian society felt increasingly smug in its whiteness, degradation of populations deemed “black” created a

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sense of community among white, or European, Russians. Populations from the distant peripheries—the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Asian Russia—experienced a sense of difference, if not alienation and harassment, in their daily lives. A society that was largely color-blind had become increasingly conscious of the role that whiteness played in determining social status. By the time Putin began the third term as president, most ethnic Russians had no problems drawing distinct lines between themselves and populations commonly referred to as “blacks.”