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INTRODUCTION

The Western Biriulëvo district sits on the southernmost tip of Moscow. It has no metro stop. Only a highway connects the district with the rest of the capital. Surrounded by railroads, giant cooling towers from a local thermal plant, rundown factories, and dozens of market and vegetable warehouses, Biriulëvo offers some of the cheapest housing in the nation's capital. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, the district witnessed an uptick in labor migration, mainly from the Caucasus and Central Asia, and acquired a reputation as a remote and seedy part of Moscow. One local resident described the place as a “sewer, Moscow’s sewer, where the government [stores] all the waste.”¹

Orhan Zeinalov, an Azerbaijani man, had left Baku in search of work. Like many migrant workers, he eventually found a job at the wholesale vegetable warehouse in the Western Biriulëvo district and rented a cheap room nearby in a high-rise apartment block. On October 15, 2013, the Russian police arrested the thirty-year-old Zeinalov, charging him with killing Yegor Shcherbakov, a twenty-five-year-old white ethnic Russian man. Shcherbakov and his girlfriend, Ksenia Popova, had been walking home three days earlier. Just as the pair approached the entrance to their apartment building, Zeinalov insulted Popova. It remains unclear what was said, but it did not take long for tensions to escalate. The men got into a heated shouting match, at which time Zeinalov pulled out a knife and stabbed Shcherbakov to death in front of his girlfriend.

The murder of Yegor Shcherbakov triggered a large riot. The event, captured dramatically on homemade videos, received international attention in the press. On Sunday October 13, disgruntled local residents, armed with sticks, rocks, and pickaxes, marched to the Biriuzo shopping center. They proceeded to smash windows and loot goods before turning their attention to the warehouse in search of dark-skinned workers. When night approached, the protestors threw

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beer bottles at police officers, rolled over several minibuses, and destroyed fruit stalls. The police wound up arresting 380 individuals for vandalism but released most of them within twenty-four hours. Subsequently, the interior minister ordered a crackdown on illegal migrants. Around 1,200 warehouse workers, most of whom were from the Caucasus or Central Asia, were arrested.²

The Biriulëvo disturbance turned out to be one of the largest outbreaks of anti-migrant unrest in Putin's Russia. One local resident, in justification of the violence, said, "We've had it up to here with these blacks."³ Clashes and arrests continued late into the night. The crowd that descended on the shopping center was comprised of men in their twenties and thirties, including right-wing nationalists wearing dark clothing, but older men and women and the occasional mother strolling a baby carriage with a camera in hand joined the demonstration, as well. Some in the crowd, which grew to several thousand people, could be

Image 0.1 People leaving a shopping center vandalized during a riot in the southern Biriulëvo district of Moscow, on October 13, 2013. Residents took part in the riot, bashing in the doors and windows of the shopping center and beating up security guards in a protest sparked by a murder blamed on an Azerbaijani migrant. © Courtesy of AFP Photo via Getty Images.

heard chanting, “Russia for the Russians,” with their animus directed toward dark-skinned migrants.⁴ For a growing number of people in the Russian Federation, the slogan became a nationalistic rallying cry. Russian print media, along with the state-aligned television channels, stoked hostilities by describing Central Asian and Caucasian migrants as “illegals” (*nelegaly*), “guest workers” (*gastarbeitery*), and other charged labels. Surveys conducted by the Levada Center revealed that a majority of the respondents agreed that Russia belonged to ethnic—that is to say, white European—Russians, while almost two-thirds supported firmer immigration restrictions and believed in the folk tale that migrants contributed to a rise in crime.⁵

The slogan “Russia for the Russians” is not a recent invention. It first gained notoriety in the very last years of the tsarist regime, appealing primarily to individuals drawn to the radical right: a politically diverse and not always coherent ideological movement obsessed with Russia’s imminent decline. Activists chanting the slogan perceived the old order as under attack. Russian rulers—from Tsar Alexander III (1881–94) to Vladimir Putin (2000–)—spent a great deal of resources trying to control territories far removed from the center of power. In late imperial Russia, as in Putin’s time, a series of crises in the borderlands threatened the sovereignty of Russian statehood and, by extension, the strength and security of the Russian people. The idea was to protect the nation by drawing exclusionary boundaries between ethnic Russians and populations in the distant borderlands—Chinese and Koreans in the east, Jews and Poles in the west, and, in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, migrants from the southern peripheries of Central Asia and the Caucasus—who allegedly posed a threat to the established ethnographic order.

Organized chronologically in four concise chapters, spanning approximately 150 years, *Racism in Modern Russia* moves beyond the history of ideas to explore a dynamic process known as racialization: how racist attitudes and perceptions of inferiority constructed a hierarchy of human difference in day-to-day experiences. Race provides a window onto the messy world of inequality and privilege, denigration and belonging, and power and policy. Focusing on several key moments in modern Russian history, this book probes the ways in which fixed

Image 0.2 Anti-Semitic postcard depicting critters with human heads crawling around the globe, stating: “The kikes crawl around, Generating misfortune, We will need to build huts for them, With the devil’s poison.” The extreme-right slogan “Russia for the Russians” appears on the top left corner of the postcard. © Courtesy of the Blavatnik Archive.

markers of difference—including skin color—created exclusionary boundaries in everyday life. Race, in other words, is not only about the history of ideas or legal policies; it is also about the creation and maintenance of ineradicable boundaries in a social system.⁶

Before the early 2000s, scholars of Russian history and culture have overwhelmingly dismissed the wider impact of race-based thought and practices.⁷ What factors account for this silence? Why have scholars shown so little interest in historical and theoretical discussions of race? Over the course of 150 years, so the argument goes, Russian administrators failed to establish a racial regime based explicitly on biological theories of human development. They never imposed absolute hierarchies, controlled populations, or limited citizenship rights based on blood or skin color. Race did not appear as an official category in censuses, passports, and other state-issued documents, as did *sosloviia* (social estates) in imperial Russia or

class (social position) and nationality in the Soviet Union. For long stretches of time, at least until the late- nineteenth century, religion served as the most basic category of identity for Russia's subjects.

Some scholars have maintained that Russia's long-established tolerance of confessional diversity, as well as its flexibility to govern the varied circumstances of empire, shielded it from racism. Russia's colonial expansion played an important role in the construction of tolerant attitudes toward minority groups. Unlike its British or French counterparts, Russia was a contiguous empire. As it expanded its territories and acquired populations, absolute distinctions did not surface between the center and periphery and the "us" and "them." In contrast to overseas empires, according to this scholarship, Russia's elites did not express fears of miscegenation, the moral and sexual dangers of contamination, and the destabilization of the fixed category of Russianness. The global dimensions of the color line—what W. E. B. Du Bois famously called the "relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Africa and Asia, in America and the islands of the sea"—did not seem to apply to Russia.⁸ The autocracy's active promotion of religiosity for all faiths of the empire—the so-called toleration thesis—helps to explain why Russians did not develop the racist thinking that became so pervasive in nineteenth-century Europe and beyond.⁹

Soviet Russia, at first glance, also seems to sit outside the orbit of the overtly racist regime. The 1917 Revolution promoted a social utopia premised on equality and internationalism. Newspapers and other propaganda organs highlighted the Soviet Union's anti-racist image on the world stage. Anthropologists and ethnographers studied race formation not in terms of biology, but in terms of sociohistorical processes. Soviet policy celebrated ethnic mixing, even as it called for all individuals to have only one officially recognized national identity. The idea was to destroy national traditions and to ease ethnic tensions. Inter-marriage was deemed the surest way of creating a single Soviet people. Soviet leaders went out of their way to denounce the United States for its racism, while showcasing the USSR as a society where such practices were absent. African American writers such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Du Bois looked to the Soviet Union as a model for Black equality.¹⁰

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This book conceptualizes the color line as inherently messy. Racialization was never a fixed or stable process. The development of hierarchical boundaries and exclusionary practices operated in a multilayered landscape. By the end of the nineteenth century, a dizzying array of ethno-racial groups resided in the Russian Empire, a contiguous landmass that extended from the Baltic and Black Seas to the Siberian fur-bearing regions, the Kazakh Steppe, and Central Asia. In this highly variegated landscape, ethnic Russians comprised less than half of the total population.¹¹ Anthropologists studied a diverse landscape of racial types, categorizing populations by an assortment of indicators such as hair and eye color, height, chest circumference, length of legs and head, skull measurements, and nasal indices. In their taxonomies, they described everyone from Great Russians, Little Russians, Poles, and Jews to Georgians, Caucasian native types, and the yellow peoples of the Far East.¹² A visitor who walked the streets of Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kazan, or Odessa would see what one historian characterized as “an alphabet soup of people at all stages of human development from the most benighted and primitive ‘children of nature’ to the most sophisticated, urbane European gentleman.”¹³

Not everyone’s skin was white. And color—with limited exceptions—did not determine social position or citizenship rights in either imperial Russia or the Soviet Union. The occasional Black women and men who paid a visit were rarely judged by their skin.¹⁴ Nevertheless, group prejudices—based on anatomical characteristics and also the much harder to pin-down cultural attributes—played a fundamental role in creating absolute hierarchies and divisions in everyday life. Occasionally, the designations took an unexpected turn. A case in point is the role of forced labor. By the eighteenth century, Russia had developed a well-established system of human bondage akin to American slavery. Serfdom meant not only the prohibition of the right of movement, but also the total control of the body. Serfs endured countless rituals of subordination, whippings, and degradations. Russians described the status of serfdom as *rabstvo*—or slavery—the same word that was used to refer to the American institution. Russians were convinced of the inherent inferiority of serfs. But they did not use skin color to legitimize the system of

bondage or invent highly elaborate scientific racial arguments—based on brain sizes, respiratory systems, and numerous other physiological differences—to justify the institution.¹⁵

In contrast to slaves in America, serfs could not be physically distinguished from their masters by their skin. Nor were they complete outsiders, deposited against their will in a foreign land. To be sure, Russians often labeled serfs as intrinsically lazy, childlike, and ignorant. But because there were no visible racial distinctions between owner and owned, after the emancipation of serfs in 1861—the majority of whom were ethnic Russians—their freedom did not pose the same threat as that of the emancipated Black slave in the United States.¹⁶ One of the long-term consequences of this historical reality is that, as former serfs blended into the Russian core, certain other populations who “looked” and “behaved” differently were marginalized as visibly distinct groups.

Over the long span of Russian history, classificatory systems played an important role in labeling people. Passports and other documentary records provided authorities a powerful tool to make sense of a diverse population. From the tsarist era to the fall of the Soviet Union, all individuals were categorized according to a state-ascribed collective identity. In Tsarist Russia, individuals were classified by estate, religion, and (increasingly) ethnicity, while in the Soviet Union, people were grouped by class and nationality. Internal passports, vital statistics cards, job applications, and school registration forms relied on these categories to delineate rights and obligations and to shape population policies.¹⁷ Russian rulers did not go to the self-conscious extremes of making race a qualification for membership in communal life, as did Nazi Germany, Jim Crow America, and other racial regimes around the world. But by rejecting the premise that an individual could belong to multiple identities, the state’s classification system primed people to see the world in unambiguous racial terms.

Under the old regime, as in Soviet Russia and the turn of the twenty-first century, race-based hatred was rooted in complex and contradictory understandings of racial categories. Scholars who interpret race in crude, biological terms or according to a strict black–white dichotomy, or question its wider impact in the making

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of social policy tend to ignore its inherent messiness.¹⁸ They also fail to appreciate its subtleties. The power of race lies in its symbolism and invisibility. Although difficult to document historically, it was the subtle aggressions that made race-based hatred such a tremendous burden to bear in the micro-politics of daily life. For the women and men who tried to distance themselves from their ethnic origins—or perhaps looked to pass for another group entirely—the everyday slights, prejudices, dismissals, and verbal abuses, whether conscious or unintentional, served as constant reminders of their true race.¹⁹

I have no intention of providing a seamless narrative of how race designations grouped and separated populations from one historical era to the next. Drawing on a wide range of historical sources, I raise exploratory questions about the meanings and functions of race. What did racial identifications and categories mean in Russia? What was the relationship between race, whiteness, and geography? How did Russia fit into the global dimensions of the color line? When and why did skin color emerge as an important element in the process of identity formation?

On one level, I explore the ways state actors promoted racial consciousness (the awareness of difference based on religion, customs, and ancestry) and racist attitudes (institutional and popular discriminations based on essential and ultimately unbridgeable differences). This is not to suggest that racialization was inherently a top-down affair, imposed by systems of government at the highest levels, or was dictated by elaborate doctrines or dogmas. To be sure, the rhetoric and policies of government actors—to say nothing of ideologies couched in baseless scientific formulations—played important roles. But I am equally concerned with understanding how ordinary people experienced, struggled with, and negotiated their place in a world where race mattered in surprising and still not entirely understood ways. In what follows, I show that racial categories—and the ideas and practices associated with the production and maintenance of difference—are fundamentally the work of history, shaped by a combination of political, social, ideological, and global forces. It is this troubling story that I tell in the pages that follow.