

# Citizens of No State: Daily Life of Shanghai White Russians, 1920s-1930s

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Since the late imperial era, Shanghai has enjoyed the enduring reputation of a cosmopolitan metropolis, thanks to the significant numbers of foreigners belonging to a diverse range of nationalities, ethnicities, and cultures. One of the most visible émigré groups was the White Russians, who fled to Shanghai due to political and economic factors after the Russian Revolution, during which they had opposed the communist Bolshevik Red Army; however, the White Russian community receives very little attention from historians. Scholarly work that details their lives and experiences is rare and fragmentary; for instance, both Hanchao Lu<sup>1</sup> and Frederic Wakeman, Jr.<sup>2</sup> briefly mention White Russians in their respective works, depicting them as a monolithic, destitute, and marginalized group surviving on the fringe of Shanghai society and playing a minor role in the day-to-day running of the city. This view of the White Russian community is narrow and does not fully flesh out their experiences abroad. Various forms of primary sources, including newspapers, police reports, and memoirs, reveal that the community was an extremely diverse group reflecting various origins, ethnicities, occupations, beliefs, and values. The White Russians of Shanghai were only united by a “hatred of the Bolsheviks who had dispossessed them and forced them to flee from their native land and to depend on foreigners.”<sup>3</sup>

My paper intends to present a more comprehensive and balanced account of the daily lives and experiences of Shanghai’s White Russian community. I plan to highlight their arrival, composition, plight, and the resources and methods they utilized to overcome these difficulties, as well as their eventual achievements. As for the time period, I will focus on the 1920s and 1930s, since there was a radical change in the White Russians’ conditions following the outbreak of World War II and the Japanese occupation of Shanghai. I will demonstrate that despite the initial hardships and discrimination, some of the Russian expatriates managed to achieve economic prosperity and upward social mobility, eventually forming a cohesive and vibrant community. Moreover, during this same time period, White Russians played an important role in the development and transformation of Shanghai as an industrial, commercial, and entertainment center. Indeed, no general history on Republican Shanghai would be complete if the experiences of the Russian émigrés were to be omitted. While it asserted no direct military threat towards the Communist mainland, it did remove a preexisting assurance of security along the Strait.

Before diving into their daily lives in Shanghai, it is necessary to discuss the Russian community in Shanghai prior to the arrival of the war refugees and to chronicle the social upheaval in early twentieth-century Russia that stimulated their mass exodus. Russians had resided in Shanghai since the 1860s. On the eve of World War I, the Russian community was small, yet relatively stable and prosperous. Some served as diplomats and merchants, while others were employed by Russian-owned banks, railroads, shipping firms, and export-import companies.<sup>4</sup> Naturally, almost all of the earlier émigrés were startled and unprepared to deal with such a large influx of refugees.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 overthrew the dictatorial Romanov monarchy and established a provisional government<sup>5</sup> subsequently replaced by the Bolshevik communist regime.<sup>6</sup> Some foreigners in Shanghai welcomed the revolution with enthusiasm; one Protestant journal applauding it as “epoch-making” and that it was “the last spike to the coffin of autocracy.”<sup>7</sup> Shortly afterwards, the bloody civil war between the Bolshevik (red) and Czarist (white) forces led to massive human relocation. When the situation became clear that the White regime was doomed, those who disagreed or resisted communist policies were labeled as reactionary and ruthlessly persecuted by the fledgling Communist government. Opponents of the new system were faced with the confiscation of property, imprisonment, exile, and even death.<sup>8</sup> As a result, a large number of White Russians were forced to move southward across the Sino-Russian border in search of a better life,<sup>9</sup> with approximately 25,000 to 50,000 of them settling in Shanghai during the Republican era.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hanchao Lu, *Beyond the Neon Light: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 39.

<sup>2</sup> Frederic Wakeman, Jr., *Policing Shanghai, 1927-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 111-112.

<sup>3</sup> John B. Powell, *My Twenty-five Years in China* (New York: Macmillan, 1945), 59.

<sup>4</sup> Marcia R. Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort: The Diaspora Communities of Shanghai* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 27.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 505-506.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 511-512.

<sup>7</sup> “Russia,” *Chinese Recorder* 48, no. 5 (May 1917): 276-277.

<sup>8</sup> George Vernadsky, *A History of Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), 258-259.

<sup>9</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 34-35.

<sup>10</sup> Lu, *Beyond the Neon Light*, 39.

The Russian Revolution was an event that affected every segment of Russian society. In terms of their social composition, the refugees were spread out among every social class. A small elites segment was composed of affluent aristocrats, officials, clergy, military officers, landowners, merchants, professionals, intellectuals, and bourgeoisie.<sup>11</sup> The vast majority, however, were impoverished White soldiers blindly following their superiors' orders to retreat to China, and peasants escaping from famine and farm collectivization in the early 1920s.<sup>12</sup> Besides ethnic Slavs, a number of Ukrainians, Poles, and Jews also joined the exodus.<sup>13</sup>

A large number of Russian refugees arrived by sea. In December 1922, Shanghai residents were amazed by the unexpected arrival of an odd fleet, or more specifically, a motley collection of warships, mail ships, tugs, and icebreakers.<sup>14</sup> Most of the fourteen vessels were small and battered, with some on the brink of disintegration.<sup>15</sup> When John Powell, an American journalist, boarded one of the warships, he encountered a crowd of ill-fed and ill-clothed refugees and found the deck "literally jammed with household equipment, ranging all the way from pots and pans to baby cribs."<sup>16</sup> It was later learned that the flotilla had set sail from Vladivostok. Right before the port fell to the hands of besieging Bolsheviks, Admiral Oskar Victorovich Stark, the flotilla commander, had gathered all available vessels and had evacuated the soldiers, sailors and their families, and civilians who remained loyal to Czar Nicholas II. The voyage was arduous and several ships sank during a storm.<sup>17</sup> Other refugees followed a different but equally grueling land route, entering China through the northwestern Xinjiang region and trekking across the immense and barren Gobi Desert.<sup>18</sup>

Refugees chose Shanghai as their final destination for several reasons. The primary reason was that the city was known for its status as a free port, allowing free entry even for those who did not possess a passport or visa.<sup>19</sup> However, the challenges were formidable even for those who made it to Shanghai. Upon their arrival, most refugees were desperately hungry and ragged, with the most urgent task being to feed, clothe, and find proper accommodation for them. In response, the Russian Emigrants Committee (REC) was established as the semi-official executive center for Russian refugees<sup>20</sup> under the leadership of Viktor Fedorovich Grosse, a diplomat sent to Shanghai by Imperial Russia in 1911 and a prominent member of the Russian émigré community.<sup>21</sup> Grosse was a reasonably competent administrator; however, due to scarce financial and human resources, the REC offered only limited assistance, to the great disappointment of the refugees. The League of Nations, the predecessor to the United Nations, dispatched a commission to investigate the living conditions of war refugees and to collect donations. After conducting a survey among White Russians, the commissioners concluded that the only feasible solutions would be repatriation or emigration. Few, however, wished to return to Russia out of fear of possible persecution, and the Soviet government outright denied any possibility of repatriation for those who desired to return.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, most of them were too poor to pay for the transportation costs and almost all nations were reluctant to accept them.<sup>23</sup> Thus, their fate as stateless citizens was virtually sealed.

In addition to the loss of their citizenship, a considerable number of expatriates were unable to secure a decent job due to their inability to speak English, the "lingua franca of the foreign community."<sup>24</sup> In general, Republican Shanghai was dominated by a rigid hierarchical system in which prejudice and distrust of foreigners persisted in the various émigré groups. For example, when a well-paid position was available, the Shanghai Municipal Council (SMC) and British firms were only willing to consider British people who were born and educated in England due to the engrained belief that British people who were brought up in Shanghai would inevitably be contaminated by the negative traits of the Chinese, and that therefore their integrity and honesty were to be doubted.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Tatiana Schaufuss, "The White Russian Refugees," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 203, (May 1939): 45.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 74-81.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>15</sup> "The Russian Ships at Woosung," *North China Herald*, December 16, 1922.

<sup>16</sup> Powell, *My Twenty-five Years in China*, 57.

<sup>17</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 39.

<sup>18</sup> "Origin and Future of the Local Russian Community," *Shanghai Sunday Times*, July 19, 1936.

<sup>19</sup> Powell, *My Twenty-five Years in China*, 58.

<sup>20</sup> Marcia R. Ristaino, "White Russian and Jewish Refugees in Shanghai, 1920-44, As Recorded in the Shanghai Municipal Police Files, National Archives, Washington, DC.," *Republican China* 16, no. 1 (November 1990): 54.

<sup>21</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 37.

<sup>22</sup> Schaufuss, "The White Russian Refugees," 47.

<sup>23</sup> "Origin and Future of the Local Russian Community," *Shanghai Sunday Times*, July 19, 1936.

<sup>24</sup> Marie-Claire Bergere, *Shanghai: China's Gateway to Modernity*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 86.

<sup>25</sup> Sergeant, *Shanghai*, 156.

As a result, many White Russians faced bleak prospects in the job markets and subsequently entered into the low-paid, unskilled workforce. Some veterans worked as dockworkers, janitors, guards, chauffeurs, watchmen, or bodyguards for Chinese dignitaries due to their strong physique and military experience.<sup>26</sup> Others, especially women, found less physically demanding job at cafés, cabarets, and dance halls serving as musicians, waiters, waitresses, and dancers.<sup>27</sup> In order to support themselves and their families, some desperate females engaged in prostitution, either voluntarily or because they were forced by unscrupulous traffickers. By the 1930s, approximately 8,000 Russians worked in the sex industry.<sup>28</sup>

One 1929 police report tells the poignant story of a Russian woman by the name of Mary Kuksova and offers a glimpse into the harsh realities that many Russian émigrés faced. Originally from Vladivostok, Kuksova was hired as a nurse by a Russian family and came to Shanghai in 1917. Two years later she was allegedly raped by her master. After that, she took refuge in a shelter and gave birth to her child there. As her social status fell, she was forced to work as a dancer in several cafés and bars, eventually contracting an unspecified disease. Eventually, her health rapidly declined to a point where she was sent to a country hospital in an unconscious state. When the Shanghai Municipal Police (SMP) informed Grosse, he said that he could not do anything for Kuksova except buy her a steamer ticket to have her sent away from Shanghai.<sup>29</sup>

The presence of the White Russians, especially the beggars and prostitutes among them, became a nuisance to the tranquility of other foreigners in the community. More important, they challenged the foreigners' entrenched ideology of white superiority, which claimed that Westerners were morally and intellectually superior to the Chinese. The foreign community, therefore, felt entitled to a higher and more prestigious status. The very sight of Caucasian vagrants begging side by side with Chinese ones unsettled and alarmed other foreigners, who regarded them as the parasites who undermined the established social order and ought to be eliminated. As a result, the White Russian was collectively regarded as "emotional, untrustworthy and usually drunk."<sup>30</sup> The hostility felt towards some was sometimes unfairly directed against the entire community of White Russians.<sup>31</sup>

Nonetheless, some organizations did make a genuine effort to help lift Russian émigrés out of their misery. One of these attempts to relieve the oversupply of labor and the chronic unemployment in the community can be found in a 1929 SMP file. According to the report, forty White Russian artisans departed for Brazil on April 6. They were masons and carpenters hired by a Brazilian company to construct a railway. Their contracts and trips were arranged by a representative from the League of Nations and coordinated by the REC. Funds from League of Nations temporarily covered their travel expenses, which were deducted from their own salaries once they started working.<sup>32</sup> The file also contained a letter from Grosse to the secretary of the Shanghai Municipal Council in which he explained the recruitment and selection process of prospective workers. It is curious to note that the employment opportunities in Brazil attracted a considerable number of White Russian workers. Although only forty craftsmen were eventually selected, the first day of recruitment attracted more than two hundred applicants.<sup>33</sup> The chaotic political and social conditions in contemporary Shanghai were a likely reason for the abnormally high number of applicants.

Despite poverty, discrimination, and language barriers, many Russian expatriates displayed a remarkable degree of determination and resilience. As time passed, some émigrés managed to achieve upward social mobility through personal effort and initiative. This trend was illustrated by the experiences of Gregory Potapoff, a cadet who followed Admiral Stark to Shanghai at the age of eighteen. The SMC housed Potapoff and his fellow cadets in a park shortly after their arrival. One day he met a Russian woman and expressed his desire of finding a job, with the woman replying that there was a vacant assistant position in her husband's construction firm. He applied for the job and was hired. Later on, Potapoff rose to a prestigious position in the SMC, enjoying a handsome wage, a decent house, and a group of Chinese servants.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, many expatriates reached white-collar position, while highly educated and skilled Russians found their niches in various positions, often working as physicians, professors, lawyers, journalists, and engineers.<sup>35</sup> For example, Georgi Sapojnikov, a talented caricaturist, reached the prestigious position of cartoonist

<sup>26</sup> Nicolas R. Clifford, *Spoilt Children of Empire: Westerners in Shanghai and the Chinese Revolution of the 1920s* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1991), 41.

<sup>27</sup> Stella Dong, *Shanghai: The Rise and Fall of a Decadent City* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 132.

<sup>28</sup> Gail Hershatter, "The Hierarchy of Shanghai Prostitution, 1870-1949," *Modern China* 15, no. 4 (October 1989): 473.

<sup>29</sup> D. S. Ovsianikoff, "Report on Miss Mary Kuksova," September 24, 1929, SMP, reel 79, File D-522.

<sup>30</sup> Harriet Sergeant, *Shanghai* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), 39.

<sup>31</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 15.

<sup>32</sup> D. I. Robertson, "Report on Russians Leaving for Brazil," September 13, 1929, SMP, reel 57, File D-195.

<sup>33</sup> Viktor Grosse to S. M. Edwards, Shanghai, April 26, 1929, in SMP, reel 57, File D-195.

<sup>34</sup> Sergeant, *Shanghai*, 44-45.

<sup>35</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 84.

for the *North China Daily News*. A man endowed with the “gift of reducing the complexities of Chinese politics to a single image and of capturing the ebullient, chaotic nature of Shanghai without sentimentality or cynicism,” Sapojnikov worked for the newspaper for more than two decades.<sup>36</sup> In a predominately patriarchal society, educated women possessing practical skills found occupations that were respectable, if not well-paid, including shop assistant, school teacher, governess, nurse, milliner, or hairdresser.<sup>37</sup>

Following in the footsteps of Potapoff, other White Russians accumulated enough wealth through hard work and prudent investment to enjoy a prosperous and middle-class lifestyle. According to contemporary newspaper accounts, Russian émigrés participated in a surprisingly wide range of business and industry, including but not limited to clothing stores (both ready-made and made-to-order), shoe stores, haberdashery, furriers, hair salons, grocery stores, bakeries, dairy sales, butchery, confectionary, brewing, distilling, pharmacy, music shops, and tanning.<sup>38</sup> By doing so, they brought “an elegant European atmosphere”<sup>39</sup> to Shanghai. Some also worked as skilled carpenters, stonemasons, goldsmiths, cobblers, printers, watchmakers, locksmiths, barbers, mechanics, and painters.<sup>40</sup> The ingenuity and entrepreneurship of Russian artisans was warmly lauded by the *North China Daily News*:

Russians made jam, salted vegetables and fruits, smoked fish, sausages; by their own special method they salt and smoke ham ... Russians draw ikons, make wax-candles, wafers and all the other necessary paraphernalia of the Orthodox church; they hew their own gravestones and monuments, have their own funeral bureaux, are famed in the field of floriculture, maintain hospitals for animals ... in short there is no breach of any artisan or factory labour in which Russians have not made use of their knowledge, experience and energy.<sup>41</sup>

Most extraordinarily, Russian craftsmen and factory owners usually lacked enough capital, thereby forcing them to use more primitive and crude methods of manufacturing than the foreign companies with which they competed. These foreign companies possessed efficient and advanced production and distribution systems. Nonetheless, the Russians continued to “struggle on, and if they do not actually conquer the competition, they would live off of their businesses.”<sup>42</sup>

From a cultural perspective, the 1930s “became a rich period”<sup>43</sup> for the White Russians. Once settled, the Whites took a special interest in celebrating and promoting their proud heritage, thereby enriching Shanghai culture through various channels. A wide variety of popular art clubs, ranging from ballets and orchestras to jazz and dramas, were founded.<sup>44</sup> The literary activities were quite vigorous as well, thanks to the large number of poets and novelists.<sup>45</sup> By 1937, Shanghai had become one of the largest publication centers of Russian books, newspapers, pamphlets, and textbooks, surpassing both Paris and Berlin. Additionally, religion became a crucial way to preserve their traditions and forge a sense of unity and belonging among an otherwise loose social group. The grand and magnificent Orthodox churches, once constructed, provided landmarks across Shanghai that served as essential meeting grounds for local Russian immigrants. Some deeply devout Russians found consolation from Orthodoxy and saw it as a powerful shield against the pains of homesickness and a crucial bond that reinforced cultural uniformity and knitted together the social fabric of the White Russian community.<sup>46</sup> John Powell noted the rich religious lives of White Russians:

I do not think I ever visited a Russian home without seeing at least one sacred ikon, and often there would be one in every room and usually with a small incense burner and oil lamp attached which was kept burning. Almost the entire foreign community turned out to observe the colorful Russian services at Christmas and Easter.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Sergeant, *Shanghai*, 34-35.

<sup>37</sup> Ristaino, “White Russian and Jewish Refugees in Shanghai,” 55.

<sup>38</sup> “In the Russian Colony: Russian Traders,” *North China Daily News*, August 9, 1937.

<sup>39</sup> Lu, *Beyond the Neon Light*, 39.

<sup>40</sup> “In the Russian Colony: Russian Traders,” *North China Daily News*, August 9, 1937.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 81.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-81.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>46</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 85.

<sup>47</sup> Powell, *My Twenty-five Years in China*, 60.

In general, White Russians shaped Republican Shanghai history in remarkable ways. In spite of financial hardship, deep trauma originating from dislocation, and the enduring humiliation of low social status and discriminatory treatment, the refugees not only survived but also prospered, revealing their astonishing tenacity and flexibility. Today, a visitor to Shanghai will find few physical relics of the White Russians except for the remains of the graceful Orthodox churches and a monument featuring the bust of Pushkin. The rest was destroyed either by the Sino-Japanese war or the Cultural Revolution.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, based upon scrutiny of the vigorous social, economic, and cultural lives enjoyed by the expatriate community, it can be safely concluded that the White Russians did leave a long-lasting mark and bestowed an indelible legacy upon the city that once accepted and sheltered them.

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<sup>48</sup> James Irwin, "The Ghosts of Russia That Haunt Shanghai," *New York Times*, September 21, 1999.