

“The Chicago of the East”: The Cross-Border Activities and Transnational Biographies of Adventurers, Shady Characters, and Criminals in the Cosmopolitan City of Harbin

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RESÜMEE

Der Beitrag diskutiert grenzüberschreitende Aktivitäten und transnationale Biographien in der mandschurischen Stadt Harbin in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts. Die an einem Eisenbahnknoten im Nordosten Chinas entstandene Stadt Harbin entwickelte sich binnen weniger Jahre von einer russischen Kolonie zu einer von vielfältigen globalen und transkulturellen Verflechtungen geprägten kosmopolitischen Stadt. Aufgrund ihrer Attraktivität für den internationalen Handel war die boomende Stadt im „wildem“ Fernen Osten auch für Abenteurer, halbseidene Figuren und Kriminelle ein Magnet. Dabei schufen die komplexen administrativen Strukturen und rechtlichen Grauzonen einer von zahlreichen Machtwechseln gekennzeichneten internationalen Stadt vielfältige Räume für halblegale und illegale Aktivitäten aller Art. In den globalen und kosmopolitischen Räumen, die Harbin bot, konnten sich besonders solche Akteure erfolgreich bewegen, die über ein transkulturelles Know-how verfügten und in transnationalen Kontexten zu agieren verstanden. Dieser Untersuchung liegen drei Fallstudien von grenzüberschreitenden Akteuren auf der „dunklen“ Seite der Harbiner Gesellschaft zugrunde, darunter die eines Zuhälterpaars, eines Spielcasino-Betreibers sowie eines transnationalen Netzwerks von Opium-Schmugglern.

At the start of the twentieth century, the multicultural city of Harbin in Northeast China represented, in the words of the British travel author John Foster Fraser (1868–1936), “a

magnet to all the adventurers in Russia."¹ Mikhail K. Vetoshkin (1884–1958), Harbin's first Bolshevik – who at the end of 1905 was drafted by his comrades in Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Empire to the city on the Songhua River (Sungari in Russian) in order to transform the local railroad workers' strikes and the mutinies of the Russian soldiers into a "proper" revolution – characterized Harbin as a city of "speculators and adventurers."² Even if Vetoshkin's apodictic remark can be attributed to his socialist-revolutionary worldview, it can hardly be denied that there was an element of truth in his evaluation. The social reality of the still young and booming Manchurian town was not just "adventurous" but also fraught with risk and danger: Its significantly high level of drug trafficking and crime, according to the British journalist Maurice Baring (1874–1945), earned Harbin the nickname "the Chicago of the East."³

During the first half of the twentieth century with its multi-ethnic immigration (in particular from various regions of the Russian Empire and mainland China), the booming railway, and trade, Harbin attracted tens of thousands of people from diverse professions and social backgrounds. Among these were numerous representatives of the elites, particularly in the period after 1917, but also a large number of characters who were attracted to the endless possibilities and enormous dynamism of the aspiring city. In Harbin these characters enjoyed a truly adventurous, and sometimes shady or even unequivocally criminal existence. Some even knew how to use the political-administrative and socio-economic freedoms, or "gaps," in the young, global city to their own advantage – and in certain cases with considerable criminal energy. Translocal and transnational business contacts and networks were often the basis for success in the city. In this way, Harbin also became an operational point for internationally operating smugglers, pimps, and human traffickers.

The aim of this contribution is specifically to highlight the "dark side" of cross-border activities and transnational biographies, which are shaped by global and cosmopolitan space. The article argues that the cosmopolitan city of Harbin provided optimal conditions for the activities of historical agents like adventurers, shady characters, and criminals, mainly because of its complex political and administrative structure and because of the economically favourable terms for regional and transnational business. By using selected examples from the city of Harbin this paper also shows that intercultural knowledge and the ability to organize themselves in transnational networks were also core competencies for the success of adventurers and dubious or criminal characters in a cosmopolitan place and global space.

1 John Foster Fraser, *Real Siberia, together with an Account of a Dash through Manchuria* (London, New York: Cassell, 1904), 226.

2 Mikhail Vetoshkin, "1905 g. v Manchzhurii. Vospominaniia o podpopl'noi rabote v tylu Manchzhurskikh armii," *Sibirskie ogni. Literaturno-khudozhestvennyi i nauchno-obshchestvennyi zhurnal*. Kniga pervaiia (Novosibirsk 1929): 155–75, 156. On the history of the revolutionary events of 1905–07 in Harbin, see Frank Grüner, "The Russian Revolution at the Periphery: The Case of the Manchurian City of Harbin," in *The Russian Revolution of 1905 in Transcultural Perspective: Identities, Peripheries, and the Flow of Ideas*, eds. Felicitas Fischer von Weikersthal et al. (Bloomington, IN: Slavica, 2013), 175–96.

3 Maurice Baring, *With the Russians in Manchuria* (London: Methuen & co, 1905, ³1906), 35.

The first part of this paper will outline Harbin's development from a Russian colony at the time of the town's foundation around 1900 to a cosmopolitan city during the 1920s and 1930s. In the following, the "dark side" of Harbin's daily life will be examined. Three case studies of different forms of border-crossing activities and transnational biographies on the "dark side" of Harbin will constitute the core of this article.

Harbin – From a Russian Colony in China to a Cosmopolitan City

The Russians founded Harbin in 1898 as part of their economic expansion into the Far East, a scheme that was instigated by the Russian finance minister Sergei Witte and by the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway.⁴ Harbin, situated in northern Manchuria along the tracks of the Chinese Eastern Railway, which stretches from the Siberian city of Chita (Transbaikalia Region) via the Russian-Chinese border cities of Zabaikal'sk and Manzhouli across Manchuria to Vladivostok, was to serve as a railway depot and administrative centre for the Russian Chinese Eastern Railway (hereafter referred to as CER). Until 1898 Harbin was only a fishing village, but because of its importance for the railway and as a key base for Russian troops in Manchuria it grew quickly to eventually become a city heavily influenced by Russia and Russians (both by ethnic Russians as well as by members of many other nationalities from the Russian Empire). Owing to its central location as a junction between two railway lines and its relative proximity to the front during the Russo-Japanese War (1904/05), Harbin became a central terminal and garrison for troops in the Russian military.

Because the control of the Russian state apparatus was much less established in the Far East, which was at that time still untapped, a lot of groups that settled in the city were

4 This dating of Harbin's foundation by the Russians is not uncontroversial as Chinese historians in particular refer to earlier settlements in the region stretching over centuries. For more on this historiographical controversy, see Søren Clausen and Stig Thøgersen, *The Making of a Chinese City: History and Historiography in Harbin* (Armonk, New York, London: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), 3–21. Other notable works treating the early history of the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER) and Harbin include: Nadezhda E. Ablova, *KVZhD i Rossiiskaia Ėmigratsiia v Kitae. Mezhdunarodnye i Politicheskie Aspekty Istorii (pervaia polovina XX veka)* (Moscow: Russkaia Panorama, 2005); Olga M. Bakich, "A Russian City in China: Harbin before 1917," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 28/2 (Juni 1986): 129–48; Olga M. Bakich, "Origins of the Russian Community on the Chinese Eastern Railway," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 27/1 (1985): 1–14; Tao Shing Chang, *International Controversies over the Chinese Eastern Railway* (Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 1936); Blaine R. Chiasson, *Administering the Colonizer: Manchuria's Russians under Chinese Rule, 1918–1929* (Vancouver, Toronto: UBC Press, 2010); Bruce A. Elleman and Stephen Kotkin eds., *Manchurian Railways and the Opening of China: An International History* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2010); Ralph Edward Glatfelter, "Russia, the Soviet Union, and the Chinese Eastern Railway," in *Railway Imperialism*, eds. Clarence B. Davis and Kenneth E. Wilburn with Roland E. Robinson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 137–54; Evgenii Kh. Nilus, *Kitaiskaia Vostochnaia Zheleznnaia Doroga: Istoricheskie Oчерk, 1896–1923* (Harbin: Tip. Kit. Vost. Zhel. dor. i T-va "Ozo," 1923); Rosemary K. I. Qvested, *"Matey" Imperialists? The Tsarist Russians in Manchuria 1895–1917* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong, 1982); Boris A. Romanov, *Russia in Manchuria (1892–1906)*, trans. Susan Wilbur Jones (Ann Arbor, Mich.: I. W. Edwards, 1952); Sören Urbansky, *Kolonialer Wettstreit: Russland, China, Japan und die Ostchinesische Eisenbahn (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2008)*; David Wolff, *To the Harbin Station: The Liberal Alternative in Russian Manchuria, 1898–1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Victor Zatssepine, "Russia, Railways, and Urban Development in Manchuria," in *Harbin to Hanoi: The Colonial Built Environment in Asia, 1840 to 1940*, eds. Laura Victoir and Victor Zatssepine (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 17–35.

those who were unwelcome in other parts of the Russian Empire. This was not only true for marginalized and discriminated against ethnic or religious minorities, such as Poles, Jews, Russian Old Believers, and German Mennonites, Harbin also attracted groups that in the opinion of the Tsarist regime endangered the existing order of the empire, including capitalists (especially those of Jewish origin), scientists, liberals, intellectuals, and revolutionaries.⁵ After 1917, due to the Russian Civil War, many people with anti-Bolshevik sympathies came to Harbin. The daily newspaper *Zaria* reported that in the year 1920 alone, at the peak of the Russian emigration wave, around 15,000 refugees came to Harbin from Russia.⁶ Among these were, according to the statistical data of the All-Russian Union of Cities (*Vserossiiskii Soiuz Gorodov*), a large number of high-ranking officers and officials as well as members of the pre-revolutionary Russian elites, including 17 generals (of the Russian White Armies), 8 former ministers, 13 clergymen, 239 landowners, 43 doctors, 40 engineers, and 6 former governors and vice-governors. Besides these illustrious characters, farmers from various regions of the Russian Empire and workers from the industrial centres represented the bulk of the immigrants.⁷ Even if only a proportion of these refugees from the Russian Empire remained in Harbin for an extended period of time, the figures nevertheless illustrate the quantitative and qualitative dimension of immigration that took place here. A contemporary witness characterized the cultural and social *mélange* that developed as a result of these waves of immigration in Harbin among the Russian population as "an odd mix of diverse social, political and cultural groups."⁸

The population grew continuously, mainly due to migrants from Soviet Russia and different regions of China. In fact, Harbin was considered a boomtown, comparable in its speed of growth to Saint Petersburg or San Francisco during the Gold Rush.⁹ According to Russian census data Harbin had 44,576 inhabitants in 1903, 28,338 of whom were Chinese and 15,579 Russians, in addition to 462 Japanese and 197 "subjects of other states," such as Austrians (63), Turks (35), Koreans (30), Germans (22), Greeks (20), among others.¹⁰ A few years later, in 1913, the city counted 68,549 inhabitants; nearly two thirds (43,691) of these were subjects of the Russian Empire and over one third (23,639) were subjects of the Chinese Empire.¹¹ In 1923 Harbin already had a popula-

5 This is why David Wolff named Harbin the "liberal alternative in Russian Manchuria"; see Wolff, *To the Harbin Station*.

6 "Statistika bezhenstva" ("Statistics of refugees"), *Zaria*, July 13, 1920, 3.

7 *Zaria*, July 13, 1920, 3.

8 Helen Yakobson, *Crossing Borders: From Revolutionary Russia to China to America* (Tenafly, N.J.: Hermitage, 1994), 45.

9 See Simon Karlinsky, "Memoirs of Harbin," *Slavic Review* 48/2 (1989): 284–90.

10 *Spravochnaia knizhka Kharbina* (Harbin: Pervaia chastnaia tipografiia v Kharbine, 1904), 7. See also Olga Bakich, "Russian Émigrés in Harbin's Multinational Past: Censuses and Identity," in *Entangled Histories: The Transnational Past of Northeast China*, eds. Dan Ben-Canaan, Frank Grüner and Ines Prodöhl (Cham, Heidelberg, New York: Springer, 2014), 83–99, 85–6.

11 See Bakich, "Russian Émigrés in Harbin's Multinational Past: Censuses and Identity," 86–7. According to some contemporary sources, by 1912 there were already some 75,000 people living in Harbin, among them some 39,000 Russians and approximately 35,000 Chinese, and another 25,000 in the adjoining Chinese settlement Fujadian; for this see, U.S. Consulate, Harbin, China, May 24, 1912; Consular Posts: Harbin, Manchuria, China; Vol.

tion of 122,821 inhabitants, which swelled to 160,670 in 1929.¹² In around 1933, when the adjacent Chinese settlement Fujiadian and a few other smaller villages nearby were already part of “Great Harbin,” the city counted 418,000 residents; in 1937 the entire population totalled 474,951 inhabitants of whom – according to the classification of the Manchukuo regime – 397,791 were listed as “Manchukuo people” (mainly Han-Chinese), 35,685 Japanese citizens, 25,865 émigrés (basically Russians without a Soviet or Chinese passport), and 7,788 foreigners.¹³

A large number of those fit for work were employed at the various plants and institutions of the Chinese Eastern Railway Company or were involved in trade and a variety of services. From its early years, trade and commerce developed dynamically in Harbin.¹⁴ The city’s economic development was initially directed and funded by the Russian Imperial government in Saint Petersburg, especially from 1898 to 1905.¹⁵ During these years trade in Harbin was primarily concerned with the supply of the Russian army and the local residents.¹⁶ Despite a temporary disruption in economic development, lasting from the end of the Russo-Japanese War until around 1908, Harbin developed into a true boomtown in the following ten to twenty years, both in view of its population growth and its economic potential.¹⁷ In around 1911, Harbin had already become the “main commercial centre” and “largest marketplace” in northern Manchuria.¹⁸ In the following years Harbin developed into a major hub for international trade between Northeast China, Russia, Europe, the USA, Japan, and the Pacific world. The importance of international soy trade via Harbin is just one example of the global interconnectedness of the Manchurian city in the 1910s and 1920s.¹⁹ At least three reasons can be given for this feverish economic upturn: Firstly, Harbin’s geographic situation on the Songhua River and at the junction of two railway lines – the Chinese Eastern Railway and the South

8: Despatches sent to the Department of State; Vol. IV: 1912, 59; Reports on Commerce and Industries, 1911; Records of Foreign Service Posts, Record Group 84 (RG 84); National Archives at College Park, MD (NACP).

12 See Bakich, “Russian Émigrés in Harbin’s Multinational Past: Censuses and Identity,” 86–7.

13 Ibid., 92–7. See also Bureau of Information Manchukuo State Council, *An Outline of the Manchukuo Empire, 1939* (Dairen: Manchuria Daily News, 1939), 25–8.

14 British Foreign Office: No. 5035. *Report for the Year 1911 on the Commercial Conditions in North Manchuria and the Trade of Harbin*, in particular 5–13.

15 Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv (RGIA) (Russian State Historical Archive), fond (f.) 323, opis’ (op.) 1, delo (d.) 983, list’ia (ll.) 34–43 (Memorandum about the needs of trade and industry submitted to Privy Councillor I. P. Shipov by the Committee of Harbin Stock Exchange, 1906).

16 RGIA, f. 323, op. 1, d. 983, l. 34.

17 For the general economic development in the CER zone and Harbin from 1906 to 1917, see Nilus, *Kitaiskaia Vostochnaia Zheleznaia Doroga*, 386–91; Quested, “‘Matey’ Imperialists?,” 209–31. For a brief history of the economy of Harbin until 1923, see S.T. Ternavskii, ed., *Ves’ Kharbin na 1923 god. Adresnaia i spravocnaia kniga* (Kharbin: Tip. Kitaiskoi Vostochnoi zheleznoi dorogi, 1925), 94–9.

18 British Foreign Office: No. 5035. *Report for the Year 1911 on the Commercial Conditions in North Manchuria and the Trade of Harbin*, in particular, 3; Quested, “‘Matey’ Imperialists?,” 214; Wolff, *To the Harbin Station*, 18.

19 See Ines Prodöhl, “A Miracle Bean: How Soy Conquered the West, 1909–1950,” *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 46 (2010): 111–29; Ines Prodöhl, “Dynamiken globaler Vernetzung: Mandchurische Sojabohnen auf dem Weltmarkt,” *Zeitschrift für Agrargeschichte und Agrarsoziologie* 61/2 (2013): 75–89; Ines Prodöhl, “Versatile and Cheap: A Global History of Soy in the First Half of the Twentieth Century,” *Journal of Global History* 8/3 (2013): 461–82.

Manchurian Railway – was very conducive to rapid economic development. Secondly, after the end of the Russo-Japanese War the city visibly opened up to non-Russian foreigners and international trade; within a short space of time it had attracted investors and business people from all over the world.²⁰ And thirdly, the city's population grew very quickly within just a few years, as outlined above. For wholesalers, merchants, entrepreneurs, and bankers, the newly founded, prospering northeastern Chinese city, which was eager for goods and services of all kinds, represented a welcome business opportunity. Against the backdrop of this enormous economic growth and massive immigration from many countries, the Russian-Chinese frontier town developed quickly into a real multicultural and cosmopolitan city. As early as 1913 (that is, only fifteen years after its foundation) 53 nationalities or ethnic groups, among them Russians, Chinese, Jews, Japanese, Koreans, Poles, Austro-Hungarians, Germans, British, Turks, and Greeks as well as forty-five languages were represented in Harbin.²¹ Many of the different national and ethnic communities that lived in Harbin had their own schools, other educational, religious and social facilities, including political parties and clubs, as well as their own press. A diverse cultural life evolved in the city where achievements of European culture, such as a symphony orchestra, a concert hall, an opera house and theater, stood next to cultural and traditional institutions of Chinese, Manchu, and Japanese origin. Cultural and ethnic segregation was less distinct than in other multicultural cities like Shanghai. In this respect, Joshua A. Fogel makes a valid point when he speaks of Harbin as a "melting pot."²²

Another typical feature of Harbin was its character as a cultural contact zone situated at the crossroads between the Far East, Siberia, and Europe.²³ As many contemporary sources have emphasized, Harbin constituted a door to China for Russia.²⁴ In fact, European-Asian or Russian-Asian encounters formed the city's "peculiar" character. These Eastern European and Asian characteristics stood side by side and penetrated one another. At the same time, contemporary viewers characterized Harbin as a frontier town and stressed the presence of borders.²⁵ Borders – geographical, political, or cultural – were as much a part of daily life in Harbin as the crossing of borders or boundaries. Despite being situated more than 500 km from the Chinese-Russian border, Harbin can nevertheless be understood as a "border town." This is particularly true in view of its multi-ethnic population and diverse cultural lifestyles, especially those of the Russo-European, Chinese, and, in later years, Japanese population groups that came together and notably

20 British Foreign Office: No. 5035. *Report for the Year 1911 on the Commercial Conditions in North Manchuria and the Trade of Harbin*, 3.

21 See Olga Bakich, "Russian Émigrés in Harbin's Multinational Past: Censuses and Identity," 83–99, 86–7.

22 Joshua A. Fogel, "Integrating into Chinese Society: A Comparison of the Japanese Communities of Shanghai and Harbin," in *Japan's Competing Modernities: Issue in Culture and Democracy, 1900–1930*, ed. Sharon A. Minichiello (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 61.

23 K. A. Poliuikhov-Morozenko, ed., *Putevoditel' po Dal'nemu Vostoku* (Harbin 1925), 17.

24 See, for example, "Charbin," in *Der Große Brockhaus* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 15th ed., 1929), 3: 734.

25 *Ibid.*, 734.

shaped the city.²⁶ However, Harbin occupied a border position not just in view of its ethnic and cultural diversity but also from a political-administrative standpoint. The 1896 Sino-Russian Treaty, which provided for the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway and authorized a right-of-way zone (*polosa otchuzhdeniia*) under CER control or as a de facto Russian concession area, formed the legal basis for the existence of Harbin and other settlements along the CER tracks.²⁷ Until around 1907, Harbin was more or less under direct Russian rule and law. After 1907, as a result of Russia's defeat in the war against Japan and because of Chinese and international criticism of Russia's predominant position in northern Manchuria, Harbin developed into an international city of treaty port character.²⁸ Residents who were not subjects of China were granted extraterritorial rights and consular jurisdiction within the city.²⁹ With the continuous strengthening of Chinese power in North Manchuria and Harbin during the 1920s, Russian and other "foreign" citizens lost these privileges. Before China gained sovereignty over the city in the second half of the 1920s, mixed Russian-Chinese courts were established to deal with offences committed by Chinese citizens on Harbin territory. In contrast, the neighboring Chinese settlement Fujiadian was under Chinese administration and jurisdiction. Directly adjacent to Harbin and separated only by the railway tracks, Fujiadian quickly grew to the size of a town. Until 1932 it was under Chinese control and only became part of the city of Harbin under Japanese rule within the newly founded state of Manchukuo. Despite the administrative and cultural borders separating Harbin and Fujiadian on a day-to-day basis, in particular in the area of trade, the two towns were closely intertwined. A significant and growing number of Chinese who were employed in Harbin as workers or traders lived in cheaper Fujiadian, which lay within walking distance of the central areas of Harbin. The close to 30,000 "border crossings" that occurred daily between Fujiadian and Harbin-Pristan' in 1911 are impressive evidence that, particularly for the countless commuters, a high level of mobility between the two neighboring cities was part of everyday life.³⁰ However, the border situation of close proximity between two

26 In fact, with regard to many aspects or areas like politics and administration, religion and nationality, ideologies and education, mass media and daily social practices, Harbin could justifiably be interpreted as a border town in Northeast Asia beyond the traditional understanding of geographical or state borders. See, Frank Grüner, Susanne Hohler and Sören Urbansky, "Borders in Imperial Times: Daily Life and Urban Spaces in Northeast Asia," *Comparativ*, 22/5 (2012): 7–13.

27 See Bakich, "A Russian City in China," 132.

28 British Foreign Office: No. 5035. *Report for the Year 1911 on the Commercial Conditions in North Manchuria and the Trade of Harbin*, 3. See also Wolff, *To the Harbin Station*, 94; Zatssepine, "Russia, Railways, and Urban Development in Manchuria," 30. For the importance of treaty ports with regard to the "opening" and socio-cultural transformation of China, see, among others, Robert Bickers, *Britain in China: Community, Culture, and Colonialism, 1900–1949* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); John K. Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy in the China Coast: The Opening of the Treaty Ports, 1842–1854*. 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953); Roads Murphy, "The Treaty Ports and China's Modernization," in *The Chinese City Between two Worlds*, eds. Mark Elvin and G. William Skinner (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), 17–71.

29 For the role of extraterritoriality and consular jurisdiction in China and Japan during the nineteenth century, see Par Kristoffer Cassel, *Grounds of Judgment: Extraterritoriality and Imperial Power in Nineteenth-Century China and Japan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

30 See David Wolff, "Russia Finds Its Limits: Crossing Borders into Manchuria," in *Rediscovering Russia in Asia: Siberia*

de facto districts, with their different administration and differing legal systems, enabled many inhabitants to circumvent Harbin's diverse trade and business regulations in neighbouring Fujiadian without forgoing the advantage of location. Products like high-proof alcohol and opium were traded to a large extent in Fujiadian, which, not surprisingly, had a direct effect on the situation in Harbin. There was also a large concentration of semi-legal and illegal services and businesses in Fujiadian, particularly prostitution and gambling, as well as establishments in which opium, morphine, and other narcotics were consumed. While the border between Harbin and Fujiadian in the "normal" practice of day-to-day life was very porous and not ostensibly evident, its significance became dramatically apparent during crisis situations like, for example, the great pneumonic plague epidemic in northern Manchuria (1910/11). During this crisis Harbin's Russian authorities temporarily closed the access route between the two cities to the Chinese population and thereby effectively isolated Fujiadian from the outside world.

Since the aim of this paper is to look more closely at the cross-border activities of transnational agents, individuals, and groups of people who can be roughly described as adventurers or as dubious or criminal characters, let us first turn our attention to adventurism and "dark side" of the city.

The "Dark Side" of Life in Harbin

It can be assumed that Harbin did not lack for adventurers and criminal elements of all kinds throughout its eventful history not least its multicultural period, which lasted until the founding of the People's Republic of China in the year 1949.³¹ Numerous journals and memoirs as well as contemporary press paint a vivid picture of the activities that marked the dark side of city life. These included: dubious entrepreneurial characters and speculators; people running opium dens, gambling halls, and brothels; smugglers and black market traders; thieves, murderers, extortionists, human traffickers, and other gangsters, which were by all accounts rife in Harbin.³² The seemingly unlimited economic possibilities presented by the booming city with its, at least temporarily, insatiable

and the Russian Far East, eds. Stephan Kotkin and David Wolff (Armonk and London: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), 40–54, 46.

31 During the first half of the twentieth century, in particular, Manchuria and Harbin were characterized by the presence of manifold cultural exchange processes and transcultural entanglements in areas like administration, economy, ideas, ideologies, culture, media and daily life. See Dan Ben-Canaan, Frank Grüner and Ines Prodöhl eds., *Entangled Histories: The Transcultural Past of Northeast China*, 1–11.

32 See among others Maurice Baring, *With the Russians in Manchuria*; Israel Cohen, *The Journal of a Jewish Traveller* (London: John Lane Bodley Head LTD, 1924); Fraser, *Real Siberia, together with an Account of a Dash through Manchuria*; Sam Ginsbourg, *My First Sixty Years in China* (Beijing: New World Press, 1982); Xiao Hong, *Market Street: A Chinese Woman in Harbin* (Seattle, London: University of Washington Press, 1986); Karlinsky, "Memoirs of Harbin"; Yaacov Liberman, *My China: Jewish Life in the Orient 1900–1950* (Jerusalem, New York: Gefen Publishing House LTD, 1998); Mara Moustafine, *Secret and Spions: The Harbin Files* (Sydney, New York: Vintage, 2002); Amleto Vespa, *Secret Agent of Japan: A Handbook to Japanese Imperialism* (London: Little, Brown & Co., 1938); Yakobson, *Crossing Borders*.

appetite for goods and services of all kinds, the regular political agitation and regime changes, the legal-administrative overlaps and gray areas, as well as the complex legal regulations and special rules for non-Chinese citizens that were in force in Harbin as part of the Russian railway zone on Chinese territory clearly held great appeal for these social groups and individuals.

The fact that in the first years of its existence Harbin was inhabited primarily by railroad workers of various nationalities (in particular Russians and Chinese), employees of the CER, and soldiers in the Russian army decisively shaped the social conditions of the city from 1898 to the first years after the Russo-Japanese War (1904/05). In a society that was characterized by a significant male majority and the excessive dreariness of day-to-day life in a settlement that was “in the middle of nowhere,” it is hardly surprising that prostitution, alcoholism, opium consumption, gambling, and criminality were widespread.³³ Alcohol and prostitution, often in connection with hooliganism and criminality, experienced a boom during the Russo-Japanese War.³⁴ In general, the situation in Harbin was exacerbated during the war years when around 100,000 soldiers in the Russian military were based in the town intermittently. This was in addition to the approximately 60,000 residents of the city (a further 40,000 inhabitants lived in the neighboring Chinese settlement Fujiadian) that had to be provided for.³⁵

The number of cases of sexually transmitted diseases, like syphilis and gonorrhea, rose steeply from the end of the 1890s onward and reveal how widespread prostitution was amongst the inhabitants of Harbin.³⁶ Although a certain degree of “normalization” set in between 1910 and 1915 with the dynamic development and urbanization of Harbin in the years after 1905 and the establishment of municipal self-administration in 1907,³⁷ drug consumption, particularly the consumption of alcohol among the Russian population and of opium and morphine among the Chinese, continued to form one of the city’s gravest social problems.³⁸

Nevertheless, within just a few years Harbin had blossomed from a bleak railroad workers’ and soldiers’ nest to a proper town with a selection of sophisticated pursuits and an even larger variety of light entertainment. Amusement in Harbin no longer comprised just cheap brothels, saloons, and opium dens, but now included high-class hotels, restaurants, a theater, cinemas, music halls, bars, other music venues, and dance cafés, which sprang up like mushrooms to satisfy the population’s growing demand and hunger for entertainment.³⁹ Despite the high prices and cost of living in Harbin, which contempo-

33 See Qusted, “Matey” Imperialists?, 101; Wolff, *To the Harbin Station*, 38.

34 Ibid., 122.

35 See Bakich, “A Russian City in China”, 142; Clausen and Thøgersen, *The Making of a Chinese City*, 32.

36 Wolff, *To the Harbin Station*, 38–9.

37 See Qusted, “Matey” Imperialists?, 257–8.

38 Ibid., 274–5.

39 Ibid., 256–60.

rary witnesses often reported on,⁴⁰ these kinds of establishments seem to have been well frequented:

*But despite the high cost of living many people seemed to maintain a lofty standard, their bountiful hors d'oeuvre surpassing an ordinary man's dinner. [...] There were a few theatres but many picture palaces with thrilling American films, and a perfect plethora of cabarets. These midnight "concert halls," as they were euphemistically designated were advertised as "gay, brilliant and cosy," some of them offering the further attraction of "plenty of air." It was here that the gilded youth, cosmopolitan adventurers, and the demi-monde, with the bourgeois in search of Bohemian pleasures, foregathered to eat, drink and be merry whilst songs and dances of dubious virtue were rendered to the strains of a jazz band. But the more serious element belonged either to the Railway Official's Club or the Commercial Club, though even here baccarat was played into the small hours, devoted wives sitting beside their husbands at the green-baize tables until fatigue or losses drove them home.*⁴¹

It nevertheless became apparent in numerous cases that the transitions between light entertainment and semi-legal or illegal business were very fluid, particularly with respect to gambling, prostitution, and drug consumption. However, the regular attempts made by the Russian CER authorities and the municipal administration to stamp out (or at least strictly limit) prostitution, drug consumption, and gambling often led to these being driven underground or into illegality. The number of establishments and people who earned their living in these professions is presumed to have increased further in the following years, not least because of the dynamic population growth.

In principle, prostitution, gambling, and the trade of opium, morphine, and heroin were carried out in Harbin (and Fujiadian) by people of practically all nationalities, which included in many cases, Russians, Jews, Chinese and Japanese, who worked closely together in these fields. However, the majority of people running the brothels, gambling saloons, and in particular the opium dens – though they were not necessarily the owners – are thought to have been Chinese (even though Russians, Jews, Japanese, and Koreans, among others, also became heavily involved in this business). In the 1930s, during the Manchukuo regime, the Japanese played a leading role in the city as property owners and managers of establishments for prostitution, gambling, and drug consumption, while on a day-to-day basis the businesses were more often run by Chinese or even Koreans.⁴²

Under these kinds of conditions the fact that a high level of criminality was practically a constant feature of day-to-day life in Harbin, is hardly surprising. Indeed, as early as the period of the Russo-Japanese War, Harbin already had a noticeably high crime rate.⁴³ At

40 See also Cohen, *The Journal of a Jewish Traveller*, 165; Baring, *With the Russians in Manchuria*, 34.

41 Cohen, *The Journal of a Jewish Traveller*, 165–6.

42 See Kathryn Meyer, "Garden of Grand Vision: Economic Life in a Flophouse Complex: Harbin, China 1940" *Crime, Law and Social Change* 36/3 (2001): 327–52.

43 See Wolff, *To the Harbin Station*, 121ff.

this time (1905), the aforementioned British journalist Maurice Baring noted deprecatingly after visiting the city that “The population of Harbin consists almost entirely of ex-convicts and Chinamen.”⁴⁴ And, after describing a range of unpalatable details from the day-to-day life of Harbin, the Englishman, who was reporting on the Russo-Japanese War for the London *Morning Post* in the years 1904/05, concluded his portrayal of the city on the Songhua River with the following scathing assessment: “The authority of the police in Kharbin seems to be non-existent. Kharbin is now called the Chicago of the East. This is not a compliment to Chicago.”⁴⁵ Baring was by no means alone in his evaluation. The American consul general in Tientsin also sent Fred Fisher, the diplomatic representative of the USA in Harbin, a travel report that painted a rather unfavourable picture of the city:

*Harbin like Dalny, was built by order. The mushroom growth of the city was only rendered possible by the presence of the troops and the great number of railway employes. The large non-official foreign population was composed of army and railway contractors, sutlers, shop-keepers and those who amused them and catered to their wants. Since the withdrawal of the troops, therefore, business is practically dead. Save for the flour mills, which constitute the one productive enterprise at Harbin, the city is living on itself. The Railway, upon whose employes and guards the townspeople must now depend, is operated at a loss of over a million roubles a month. Salaries are sometimes weeks in arrears. No attempt is made to attract a legitimate freight traffic although goods might well be imported through Vladivostok and sent via Harbin to the North Manchurian markets. Although in the throes of “hard times” Harbin can boast more restaurants, cafes, theatres, and other places of amusement than either Shanghai or Hongkong. The wealth of the community is not, it is safe to say, ten per cent of that of either of the two places mentioned. Ex-convicts from Saghalien (Sakhalin), Greeks, Caucasians, Circassians, of the worst type batten on the town. Robberies and murders are frequent. People go armed at night and it is unsafe for a woman to venture out unattended after sunset, while the insufficient and underpaid police force is either in league, or unable to cope, with the criminal classes. Living is high, rents exorbitant, and the commercial outlook at present barren.*⁴⁶

Although conditions in Harbin stabilized to a certain extent over the years under the municipal administration established in 1908 by the CER management, overall the general crime rate remained very high. In fact, at the start of 1920 the total number of crimes increased significantly in comparison with the number from the previous year. *Zaria*, Harbin’s daily newspaper, held various factors responsible for this rise in criminality,

44 Baring, *With the Russians in Manchuria*, 34.

45 *Ibid.*, 35.

46 U.S. Consul General to Fred D. Fisher, American Consul, Mukden, China, December 12, 1907, with enclosed report on “The trip from Mukden to Vladivostok and political conditions in Northern Manchuria”; Consular Posts: Harbin, Manchuria, China; Vol. 22: Despatches received from Consulates; Vol. I: 1906 to 1907, 211–22, 214–15; RG 84; NACP.

including the political events and upheavals that had taken place in Russia after the Revolution of 1917, which had supposedly resulted in countless "criminal elements" being freed from Russian prisons, many of whom allegedly made their way to Harbin.⁴⁷ The newspaper went on to claim that besides the influx of thousands of people, the presence of various (military and other) units of troops and other groups as well as the disarmament of the Russian police (i.e. the railway guards) were additional important reasons for the increase in criminality.⁴⁸ In this context, it is interesting to note that in Harbin – presumably following the example of America – a private detective agency was established in the year 1920 to solve crimes.⁴⁹ The overall impression was that the loss of Russian governance over the railway zone under the Chinese-Russian administration after 1920 resulted in an increase of murders, abductions, extortion, muggings, drug-related crime, theft, smuggling, and black market trade as well as all possible forms of petty crime during the 1920s and 1930s. The impression that Harbin represented an extraordinary adventurous and dangerous place was also shared by the French journalist Gabrielle Bertrand who visited the "Chicago of the East" in 1936:

*After two days in Harbin, when you have been instructed about what is hidden under the swarming of the surprising and dangerous city, surpassing in audacity, in gangsters, in intrigues, in follies, the worst of American Chicagos ... you won't abandon yourself without circumspection to the exhilarating charm of its streets. Kidnapping and murder are played out in the open on all chords and scales. Sometimes, the adventure resembles more a vaudeville, but, often, it can end up with tragedy. What a city!*⁵⁰

The intensifying economic and social conditions in the city, a consequence of the global economic crisis, which had been acutely affecting Manchuria since the late 1920s, had combined with the almost insurmountable political tensions and rifts in Harbin society to create a climate in which political adventurism, nationalism, and extremism were able to thrive easily.

Adventurers, Shady Characters, and Criminals: Three Case Studies

In the following discussion I will demonstrate, on the basis of three concrete examples, the different forms of cross-border activities and transnational biographies – individuals or those of certain groups of actors or networks – that can be identified with regards to the "dark side" of Harbin. An overview will be given of: (1) the criminal dealings of a married couple, calling themselves Schimmel, who traded in girls internationally and

47 *Zaria*, no. 58, June 25, 1920, 4.

48 *Ibid.*, 4.

49 *Ibid.*, 4.

50 Gabrielle Bertrand, *Seule dans l'Asie troublée. Mandchoukouo-Mongolie 1936–1937* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1937), 55. English text quoted from Thomas Lahusen, "A Place Called Harbin: Reflections on a Centennial," *The China Quarterly* 154 (1998): 400–10, 405.

ran a brothel in Harbin; (2) the semi-legal and partly illegal gambling business of J.A. Foster; and (3) the criminal networks of organized opium smuggling between Russia and China.

I

The case of the Schimmel or Schemmel couple demonstrates the extent to which internationally operating criminals were able, when carrying out their criminal activities, to make purposeful use of legal loopholes. It also reveals the ambiguities and overlapping jurisdictions of various states and authorities in an international setting, in this case in colonial China.

At the end of July 1911, Constant Schimmel was arrested by the French authorities in the Chinese city of Tientsin while attempting to force a prostitute who had fled from a Harbin brothel to return to Harbin. Interestingly, Schimmel was exposed because he, quite brazenly, attempted to enlist assistance from the diplomatic representative of France in claiming the girl:

Schimmel came here on July 26, and stopped at the Astor House, representing himself as a mining prospector. He went into the French Concession, among the houses of ill fame, and found a French girl whom he and his alleged wife had taken from Paris and had forced into a life of shame. It was this girl he came to Tientsin to find, and to take back to Harbin with him. To get rid of him, she promised to go. On the morning of the 27th he called at the house to get her, but was handed a note from her by the landlady, in which she refused to go with him. Schimmel then went to the French consul. He claimed to be a French subject, and asked the aid of the consul in securing this girl. He said he had come out from Paris at the request of her parents to take her away from a life of shame and bring her home. The French police interviewed the girl, and fortunately believed her rather than Schimmel. The latter was arrested, and the baggage seized.⁵¹

At first the authorities (the diplomatic representatives of the USA and France in Harbin, Tientsin, and Beijing), who were investigating both persons under the charge of white-slave trafficking and pimping, were not able to clarify with any certainty the identity of Schimmel and his wife, both of whom, by all accounts, came from France. According to his own statements, Schimmel was not a French but an American citizen from Seattle who had married in Butte, Montana.⁵² The American consul in Harbin, Roger Greene, testified that although Schimmel spoke with a French accent, he possessed an American passport with the name “FAC Schemmel,” called himself a “mining prospector,” and claimed American birth.⁵³ Despite the authenticity of the documents, which were

51 U.S. Consul General to Roger S. Greene, U.S. Consul in Harbin, Tientsin, China, July 29, 1911 (U.S. Consul General to Greene); Consular Posts: Harbin, Manchuria, China; Vol. 26: Despatches Received from Consulates; Vol. V: 1911, 243–46, 244 (Vol. 26, Despatches Received from Consulates, 1911, 243–46); RG 84; NACP.

52 U.S. Consul General to Greene; Vol. 26, Despatches Received from Consulates, 1911, 245; RG 84; NACP.

53 Ibid., 243.

established by the American consul general in Tientsin, the authorities remained doubtful about the legality of Schimmel's American citizenship.⁵⁴ One way or another, the diplomatic representatives of the USA were responsible for the case in accordance with the prevailing policy of consular jurisdiction for foreign citizens in the Chinese treaty ports and the other concession areas of foreign powers on Chinese territory, which also included the Russian railroad zone in northern Manchuria. It was on this basis that the French representative handed the case over to the Americans.

At the time of Schimmel's arrest at the end of July 1911, he and his wife were already on record as criminals in several countries including France and Russia. Schimmel was particularly well known to the French police. According to information from the American consul general, who was dealing with the case, Schimmel was indicted for white-slave traffic in France and was wanted all over the world.⁵⁵ However, due to his legal status as an American citizen it was almost impossible to extradite him from China or from foreign concessions in China.

Schimmel appears to have operated internationally in his criminal business dealings and was presumably also part of an international network of criminals that made money in human trafficking and pimping.⁵⁶ In addition, according to information from the Russian consul general in Tientsin, Schimmel had spent some time in prison in Vladivostok for "procurement of a girl."⁵⁷ In the area of pimping and prostitution, Schimmel and his wife Marie, who was also called Marie Germain, worked together closely. The latter most likely came from Paris; she met her husband during a series of business trips to North Africa, accompanied him to Moscow and the Far East of Russia as well as China, and for a time (probably in the years 1908 to 1911) ran a brothel in Harbin.⁵⁸

In August 1911 two further women who were employed by the Schimmels as prostitutes were questioned by the American consul general in Tientsin. Their testimony filled out the picture of the Schimmels' larger criminal activities.⁵⁹ According to these witness statements, Schimmel hired young women in various towns and led them into prostitution, this included working for the brothel that his wife Marie was running. It appears that later Marie Schimmel also worked as a prostitute, at least for a time. After leaving Paris they apparently first travelled to Moscow where Marie attempted to open a brothel. She was not successful; the Schimmels traveled on to Vladivostok and Khabarovsk with the girls whom they had selected. However, in both of these cities, their attempts to open a house of ill repute seemed to have been equally unsuccessful. It was only when they

54 Ibid., 244.

55 Ibid., 245.

56 Ibid., 245.

57 U.S. Consul General to Roger S. Greene, U.S. Consul in Harbin, Tientsin, China, August 2, 1911 (U.S. Consul General to Greene); Consular Posts: Harbin, Manchuria, China; Vol. 26: Despatches Received from Consulates; Vol. V: 1911, 251 (Vol. 26, Despatches Received from Consulates, 1911, 251); RG 84; NACP.

58 U.S. Consul General to Greene; Vol. 26, Despatches Received from Consulates, 1911, 245–46; RG 84; NACP.

59 Affidavits of Marthe Levillain and Marie Chesneau in Schimmel case at the American General Consulate; Tientsin, China, August 5, 1911; Consular Posts: Harbin, Manchuria, China; Vol. 26: Despatches Received from Consulates; Vol. V: 1911, 289–91; RG 84; NACP.

reached Harbin, which was for the time being the last station on their journey through the Far East, that Marie Schimmel finally succeeded, in 1908, in opening an establishment.

Further investigations confirmed the authorities' original suspicion that Marie Germain from France and Marie Schimmel or Schemmel were the same person. Like her husband, Marie Germain (aka Marie Schimmel) was in possession of an American passport and had attempted some time before – without success – to obtain a guarantee or protection from the American representative in Harbin for her enterprise, as she had evidently come into conflict with the Russian authorities.⁶⁰ She did not agree to pay taxes for her business in Harbin and left the town. Only a short time after her departure from Harbin at the beginning of August 1911, Marie Schimmel turned up again in Tientsin, apparently looking for her missing husband.⁶¹ However, according to the assessment of the American consulate general, Marie Germain (aka Marie Schimmel) was in fact attempting to bring a French girl, who had presumably worked in her Harbin brothel, back to Tientsin for her husband's business purposes.⁶² At this point, the investigations of the American and French authorities against the Schimmels in China had already picked up pace, but the American diplomats feared that they would not be able to try the Schimmels before the American consular court due to a potential legal loophole:

*Mr. Davies, Clerk of the U.S. Court for China, arrived this afternoon, to assist in this case, in the absence of Dr. Hinckley. Schimmel will probably be brought up for examination on Monday. The difficulty is, that there is no law of the United States, the District of Columbia, or of Alaska, which covers white slavery and procuration for this traffic. I very much fear we shall have to bring Schimmel up on a charge of vagrancy.*⁶³

In the subsequent process before the American consular court, the ambiguities about whether Schemmel could be tried in China for white-slave traffic proved advantageous for the defendant.

I write you to inform you of the outcome of the Schemmel case, which was pertly stated in previous letters. Mr. Davies and I considered that we had a good case against Schemmel, of the White-slave Traffic Act of June 25, 1910, applies to China. (Statutes of the U.S., 61st Congress, 2d Session: Part I, page 825.) We telegraphed to Dr. Hinckley, at Chuzenji, Japan, asking the question. Having no reply in more than three days, Schimmel was tried on Aug. 9 under the vagrancy laws; found guilty, and sentenced to pay a fine of \$100, gold, and to be imprisoned in Shanghai jail for sixty days. [...]

60 Roger S. Greene, U.S. Consul, to F. Romero, Consular Agent of France, August 3, 1911; Consular Posts: Harbin, Manchuria, China; Vol. 26: Despatches Received from Consulates; Vol. V: 1911, 247–48, 247); RG 84; NACP.

61 U.S. Consul General to Roger S. Greene, U.S. Consul in Harbin, Tientsin, China, August 4, 1911 (U.S. Consul General to Greene); Consular Posts: Harbin, Manchuria, China; Vol. 26: Despatches Received from Consulates; Vol. V: 1911, 256–57 (Vol. 26, Despatches Received from Consulates, 1911, 256–57); RG 84; NACP.

62 U.S. Consul General to Greene, Vol. 26, Despatches Received from Consulates, 1911, 256–57.

63 Ibid., 257.

*The next morning after the trial, a message arrived from Hinckley, saying in effect the law applies to China. Unfortunately it was too late for us.*⁶⁴

The juridical information about the fact that Schimmel could not be tried for white-slave traffic by an American consular court in China did not reach the American general consul until August 19, 1911, one day after the hearing of the Schimmel case and its comparatively mild verdict of "vagrancy."⁶⁵ It appears that a continuation or renewal of the trial against Schimmel was impossible. Marie Germain (aka Schimmel) got off even more lightly than her husband (that is, completely unpunished) because ultimately it was not possible to prove that she had committed any criminal act.⁶⁶

II

It should be stated that the extremely complex and to some extent ambiguous legal situation combined with the fact that jurisdictions were disputed by the various states created ideal conditions for "international adventurers" to successfully pursue their semi-legal or illegal business in the realms of gambling, prostitution, and drug trafficking.

Gambling is said to have been even more popular and widespread in Harbin than prostitution. Indeed, quite a lot has been written about the inclination of the Chinese towards gambling in all of its forms, and gambling doubtless also represented a phenomenon that was of great significance for the whole of China. In Harbin and Fujiadian all types of gambling could be found – in the streets, in bars, as well as in special gambling saloons – and overall it can be said that the differing needs and financial means of customers from all social classes were generously catered to. On the streets of the city the Chinese dominated while in the casinos and behind the scenes, where larger sums of money were involved, the gambling was comparatively international, both with respect to the managers of the respective establishments and their visitors. Whereas gambling had a centuries-old tradition in China and was, for the most part, tolerated until the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Russians met it with disapproval, and the authorities in Harbin made every effort to prohibit these kinds of ventures. In reality, the scope of the endeavour to eliminate gambling in the railway zone, which was dominated by the Russians until 1924, was very limited, particularly in Harbin where the managers of gambling enterprises could slip into neighbouring Chinese Fujiadian or, alternately, indicate their immunity as foreign citizens in Harbin since these activities were covered by the diplomatic representatives of the responsible countries on the basis of extraterritorial rights. The latter scenario is demonstrated in the example of a casino that opened its

64 U.S. Consul General to Roger S. Greene, U.S. Consul in Harbin, Tientsin, China, August 12, 1911 (U.S. Consul General to Greene); Consular Posts: Harbin, Manchuria, China; Vol. 26: Despatches Received from Consulates; Vol. V: 1911, 263–65, 263 (Vol. 26, Despatches Received from Consulates, 1911, 263–65); RG 84; NACP.

65 U.S. Consul General to Roger S. Greene, U.S. Consul in Harbin, Tientsin, China, August 14, 1911 (U.S. Consul General to Greene); Consular Posts: Harbin, Manchuria, China; Vol. 26: Despatches Received from Consulates; Vol. V: 1911, 266–67 (Vol. 26, Despatches Received from Consulates, 1911, 266–67); RG 84; NACP.

66 U.S. Consul General to Greene, Vol. 26, Despatches Received from Consulates, 1911, 263–64; RG 84; NACP.

doors to the Harbin population in May 1909. In its article “A New Gambling Resort,” the Russian-language Harbin newspaper *Novaia Zhizn'* reported on a case of this kind and made no secret of its general aversion to the newly opened gambling establishment:

*A new gambling resort has been opened in the Pristan under the name of “The International Club”; the club is devoted to roulette. In the club are posted placards stating that “Only Members are Admitted,” but a membership ticket, on which you can write your name if you wish, is given to every one that puts down a ruble or so. In the “club” there is nothing suggestive of a club, except a few newspapers. Play continues all night; cognac and cold drinks are served free to the visitors, which is easy to account for as it is not so difficult to rob a man who has been drinking.*⁶⁷

The international dimension of this matter is especially pertinent to this article and did not escape the attention of the reporter of *Novaia Zhizn'*:

*On Sunday, the first day that the club was opened, as many as 300 persons visited the place, bringing their contributions to the international adventurers. One cannot but wonder how it happens that the public is allowed to be robbed in the very center of the city. All kinds of games of chance are prohibited, and especially roulette. Laborers and clerks have already lost their last farthings. If loto has already done us so much harm, what may we say of roulette? A comparatively harmless shooting gallery opened on Kitaiskaya Street, was immediately closed. One can imagine what sort of scenes are likely to be enacted in the “club” if the Chinese, well known for their gambling propensities, begin to flock there. Both the Russian and the Chinese authorities should take measures for the immediate closing of this abominable establishment, before it costs the people something more than a few thousands in a single day. Let the international parasites take themselves off Russian territory to some other place and there rob the credulous who bring their all to enrich the adventurers. There must be no delay. On the second day the “club” was filled to overflowing. We must not wait till the suicides of the ruined begin. If we want to resemble a civilized town it will not do for us to maintain a Monaco in our midst.*⁶⁸

The dramatic way in which *Novaia Zhizn'* denounced the “international adventurers” and “international parasites” on “Russian territory”⁶⁹ [!] is striking. The aggressive terminology chosen by the newspaper can be readily understood within the wider context of a critique of cosmopolitanism that was widespread in late tsarist Russia,⁷⁰ but it was sur-

67 *Novaia Zhizn'*, May 4, 1909 [April 21, 1909, o.s.].

68 *Ibid.*

69 The fact that the Russians in Harbin and Manchuria generally felt like they were on their “own territory” is representative of the common perspective among the Russian population at least until 1918, even though this by no means corresponded to the political and internationally recognized status.

70 With respect to the negative conceptualization of “cosmopolitans” in Russian and Soviet history, see Frank Grüner, “Russia’s Battle against the Foreign: The Anti-Cosmopolitanism Paradigm in Russian and Soviet Ideology,” *European Review of History – Revue européenne d’histoire* 17/3 (2010): 445–72. For political concepts and ideologies in tsarist Russia and Germany until 1933, characterized by anti-modernist, anti-capitalist, and anti-Semitic approaches, see also Heinz-Dietrich Löwe, *Antisemitismus und reaktionäre Utopie. Russischer Konservatismus im*

prising, at least in the period before the Russian Revolution of 1917, or in other words before the large-scale migration of anti-Bolshevist "Whites," to find these sentiments in a place like Harbin where a particularly large number of enterprisers of all kinds from all over the Russian Empire and the world were unabashedly seeking their fortunes.

However, the polemics directed by the Russian press against the "international adventurers" do not appear to have been totally unfounded. The actual or alleged internationality and citizenship of the gambling saloon's manager did in fact raise a series of questions that in the end could not be clarified unequivocally. Therefore, it was not only the CER and Harbin's city administration that become involved in the complex case, but also various consulates based in Harbin, above all the American consulate, the Russian consulate general, and the Spanish embassy. The Russian Consulate General wrote to the Acting Spanish Consul, Mr. F. Romero de Quadra, asking him to take measures to close the establishment immediately.⁷¹

According to the American consul's estimation of this matter, which can be assumed to be correct, Foster made use of his illegally acquired Spanish documents in order to operate his gambling establishment without being brought to justice by the British embassy or, in its place, the American consul in Harbin.⁷² In accordance with the prevailing principle of consular jurisdiction for foreign citizens in the CER zone, in this case the relevant British diplomatic mission would have been responsible for Foster.

Since it was evidently not possible to prove the illegitimacy of Foster's Spanish documents due to the Spanish consul's support of his activities (or since the consul for whatever reason did not want to confirm it) the British and American diplomats' hands were tied in the matter.⁷³ It appears that the Russian authorities were not prepared to accept the (feigned) immunity of the "Spanish citizen," Foster, and several days later members of the Russian railway guards forced their way into the Harbin casino, interrogated Foster against his will, and seized the roulette wheel.⁷⁴ The actions of the Russians immediately provoked protest by the Spanish consul, who had been brought in to deal with the matter and with the "unlawful course of action" of the Russian railway police, as well as demands that they refrain from such measures in the future.⁷⁵ Since the Russian consulate general would not hear the Spanish envoy's protest he turned to the Harbin

Kampf gegen den Wandel von Staat und Gesellschaft (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1978); Matthew Lange, *Antisemitic Elements in the Critique of Capitalism in German Culture 1850–1933* (Oxford: Lang, 2007).

71 Roger Greene, U.S. Consul, to W.W. Rockhill, American Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary, Harbin, China, May 5, 1909 (Greene to Rockhill); Consular Posts: Harbin, Manchuria, China; Vol. 11: Despatches sent to the Legation; Vol. I: 1906 to 1909, 447 (Vol. 11, Despatches sent to Legation, 1906–1909, 447); RG 84; NACP.

72 A British consulate only existed in Harbin from the beginning of 1910. In the years prior to this British commissarial interests were handled by the American representative.

73 Greene to Rockhill; Consular Posts: Harbin, Manchuria, China; Vol. 11, Despatches sent to Legation, 1906–1909, 448; RG 84; NACP.

74 Roger Greene, U.S. Consul, to W.W. Rockhill, American Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary, Harbin, China, May 8, 1909 (Greene to Rockhill); Consular Posts: Harbin, Manchuria, China; Vol. 11: Despatches sent to the Legation; Vol. I: 1906 to 1909, 451–54 (Vol. 11, Despatches sent to Legation, 1906–1909, 451–54); RG 84; NACP.

75 Greene to Rockhill; Consular Posts: Harbin, Manchuria, China; Vol. 11, Despatches sent to Legation, 1906–1909, 451–52; RG 84; NACP.

consulates of other nations with requests for support in the matter.⁷⁶ As a result of the efforts of the Spanish diplomat, the Japanese consul general, T. Kawakami, invited the diplomatic representatives of Russia, Spain, Belgium, France, and the USA to an “informal” meeting.⁷⁷ At this meeting the attendant Russian vice-consul conceded that an “illegal course of action” had been taken by the railway police against Foster and confirmed that the items confiscated from the casino would be returned to the owner along with a letter of apology for the inappropriate actions of the railway militia.⁷⁸ In addition, the Russian vice-consul announced that there would be an investigation into the actions of the railway guards. As the American consul later reported to his superior in Beijing, the Spanish diplomat was not satisfied with the Russian general consulate’s letter as it did not contain any apology but only promises to investigate the matter.⁷⁹ By all accounts, the Russian diplomats appeared again to be justifying the actions taken against Foster and his casino through the Spanish consulate’s reluctance to take legal steps against the casino.⁸⁰ In his concluding assessment, the American consul saw the matter as further evidence that jurisdictions under the Russians, in particular between the CER and the consulate general, were not clearly regulated and that the Russian authorities in Harbin, like in the case described, often did not adhere to international treaties.⁸¹ Generally speaking, the American consul’s evaluation seems an accurate one.

III

Another phenomenon that was widespread in Manchuria, which generally involved internationally operating bands or cross-border networks and required a large amount of criminal energy, was the smuggling and illegal trading of drugs like opium, morphine, heroin, and alcohol. In particular, the Russo-Chinese smuggling and trading of opium represented an almost ubiquitous and ultimately insurmountable problem for Harbin and the entire territory of the CER. Harbin’s situation as a railway junction of Manchuria, a border region of Northeast Asia in which Chinese, Russians, Japanese, and members of numerous other nations interacted and – with varying success – contended for political and economic influence, combined with the administrative and legal overlaps of jurisdiction and loopholes, benefitted the central position that the city already occupied in the regional and international opium trade only a few years after its founding.

The mass illegal import and cross-border trade of opium in China, especially in the concession areas of the Western colonial powers, was an occurrence that was well known, not least from the period of the so-called Opium Wars between Great Britain and China

76 *Ibid.*, 452.

77 *Ibid.*, 452.

78 *Ibid.*, 452–53.

79 *Ibid.*, 454.

80 *Ibid.*, 454.

81 *Ibid.*, 453–54.

(1839–42 and 1856–60).⁸² With respect to opium trade in northern China and Manchuria in the early twentieth century, the Chinese Eastern Railway to some extent had a role in the Chinese concession ports that was comparable to the British East India Company during the mid-nineteenth century. The decisive difference, however, lay in the fact that both the Chinese Eastern Railway Company as an economic enterprise and the Russian government, under whose direct leadership the CER fell until 1924 (after the revolution the CER was temporarily under the administration of the White Army), officially prohibited the trading of opium and at times even rigorously fought it. The management of the CER under Lieutenant General Afanas'ev, who was responsible for civil administration, issued two orders, one on October 5, 1911 (o.s.) and a slightly sterner version on June 24, 1914 (o.s.), which made the trading, storage, and transport of opium, morphine, and other narcotics within the area of the railway zone an offence punishable with fines of up to 500 rubles or imprisonment for up to three months.⁸³ As early as 1910 the Harbin police officer von Arnol'd demanded "the most energetic measures imaginable for the eradication of opium consumption" and decisive action by the police against this widespread social ill.⁸⁴ In fact, on the initiative of the CER management and the municipal authorities Harbin's (Russian) police had taken concrete steps against drug consumption between 1910 and 1911. During this time they cleared 277 opium dens and arrested 446 opium consumers within the space of only twelve months.⁸⁵ However, the authorities of Harbin were aware that these kinds of measures in the fight against mass opium consumption in the city were ultimately only a drop in the proverbial ocean. The commitment of the Russian CER and the city administration against the opium trade can be explained not least by the fact that, besides the Chinese population, Russians were also increasingly consuming opium and other drugs at an alarming rate in Harbin and other parts of the railway zone, as was made quite clear in an internal report by a leading committee of the CER.⁸⁶

In practice, despite regularly uncovered smuggling attempts, the efforts of the CER ultimately enjoyed little success because the overwhelming majority of opium was transported from various countries via Russia to China on the Chinese Eastern Railway itself. This would hardly have been possible without the participation of several leading employees and numerous minor workers in the CER. For this reason, on the basis of official

82 See Samuel S. Mander: *Our Opium Trade with China* (London: Simpkin, Marshall Pub., 1877). See also Gregory Blue, "Opium for China: The British Connection," in *Opium Regimes: China, Britain, and Japan, 1839–1952*, eds. Timothy Brook and Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 31–54; John Y. Wong, *Deadly Dreams: Opium, Imperialism, and the Arrow War (1856–1860) in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

83 RGIA, f. 323, op. 1, d. 597, list (l.) 123 (Compulsory Decree no. 40 by lieutenant-general Afanas'ev, Management of CER, 24 June 1914).

84 *Novaja Zhizn'*, no 85, March 31, 1910.

85 RGIA, f. 323, op. 1, d. 597, ll. 61–4 (Report no. 2393 of the Harbin police constable to the Management of the CER, Harbin, April 20, 1911).

86 RGIA, f. 323, op. 1, d. 597, ll. 122, 124 (Journal no. 80 from the Meeting of the Special Council under the Management of the CER, June 18, 1914).

information received from Beijing, the Russian Foreign Ministry informed the management of the CER in June 1914 that opium was being systematically smuggled by railroad company representatives from Western Europe to China via Russia and Manchuria in sleeping cars occupied by passengers.⁸⁷

The immense significance of opium smuggling and trade for Harbin and the central role of the CER in the transportation of these smuggled goods are highlighted in an article from the daily newspaper *Zaria* dated to August 31, 1920:

With almost every train arriving from the direction of the station "Pogranichnaia" [on the Russian-Chinese border] and with every further transport to the south in the direction of Changchun, opium is brought for sale in Harbin. Harbin has the function of a kind of distribution point. The opium companies are concentrated here, whole consortiums and groups of people who are specially employed with the trade, sale and transported of the prohibited ware. Corporations and enterprises with capital of several tens of thousands of dollars are springing up, special wagons with all kinds of hiding places for concealing the transported opium are being built. One can make the bold assumption that in Harbin alone no fewer than 1,000 people earn their money around the opium business, including the army of all possible middlemen in the sale and transport of opium. [...]

The colossal profit combined with a low level of responsibility for the transport of the smuggled goods entices masses of interested parties who are prepared to take the risk and earn money from the transport of opium. [Opium] is imported in small batches of 10 to 20 pounds and in whole consignments that reach several poods [Russ. unit of weight, 1 pood ≈ 16.38 kg]. Recently 14 poods [≈ 229.32 kg] with an estimated value of 16,000 dollars were confiscated all at once from service wagon no. 2006.⁸⁸

This estimate of the financial dimension of opium smuggling and trade in Harbin and its consequences for city life is unlikely to be an exaggeration; it incidentally corresponds to the numerous reports and documents of the CER, Harbin's city administration, the various consulates, as well as various media sources in Harbin and internationally.

Since the opium business represented potentially enormous profits for smugglers, traders, and those running opium dens, a plethora of people of differing nationalities and with highly varied social backgrounds and biographies swarmed into this area. People from the most diverse professional positions and social classes, from Chinese and Russian opportunists and petty criminals, adventurers of all kinds, and professional band leaders to border soldiers, railway guards, police officers, leading employees of the CER and diplomats of different countries, were involved in various ways with criminal activities related to opium smuggling and trade. Around 1914 the influential newspaper *North China Daily News* declared that Russian Jews were the masterminds behind Russo-Chi-

87 RGA, f. 323, op. 1, d. 597, l. 103 (Note from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Management of the CER, June 9, 1914).

88 *Zaria*, no. 112, August 31, 1920, 3.

nese opium smuggling.⁸⁹ The fact that there were a range of typically Russian-Jewish surnames, such as Gol'dberg, Akkerman, and Aronov, among the named persons who were convicted in 1913 of opium smuggling by the railway police suggests at least some degree of participation on the part of Russian citizens with Jewish origins in the opium business.⁹⁰ But, in Harbin, Jews generally played an important role as middlemen and brokers in almost all areas of trade at least until the start of the 1920s.⁹¹ In the 1920s the smuggling and trade of alcohol, opium, and other drugs is said to have shifted increasingly to Chinese business people who had also played an important part in previous years: "Meanwhile the smuggling trade has assumed throughout the Amur the character of an organised industry in the hands of the Chinese."⁹² During the 1930s, under the Manchukuo regime, although the Japanese had an official monopoly in the opium trade, Koreans and Chinese were also involved in the business dealings.⁹³ Regardless of whoever was actually at the head of these kinds of criminal organizations or close-knit interest groups, various sources allow no doubt that the large-scale trade in opium was generally carried out by strategically well-placed, transnational networks involving a large number of people on both sides of the Russo-Chinese border who cooperated with one another. In the year 1913 alone, Harbin's police force uncovered the illegal activities of 484 people who were involved in the trade of opium and morphine.⁹⁴ In all probability, until their arrest, these criminals were organized in a small number of bands or networks in Harbin.

Conclusion

The list of examples for the cross-border actions of adventurers, shady characters, and criminals of all kinds in Harbin can be easily extended. Further fascinating examples of cross-border activities and adventurism in the city could include revolutionaries like the already mentioned first Bolshevik of Harbin, Mikhail Vetoshkin, and agents like the Italian-born Amleto Vespa (who later became a Chinese citizen and between 1922 and 1940 worked as a secret agent in Harbin and Manchuria, first in the service of the Chinese War Lord Zhang Zuolin and then for the Japanese)⁹⁵ and the almost legendary spy, Richard Sorge, who worked for the Soviet secret service and then later as a reporter for the German news service in various parts of China, including Shanghai and Harbin, and Japan. However, these personalities represent a different type of transnational biography from the three biographical examples outlined in this article. If we compare the case studies

89 *North China Daily News*, April 8, 1914.

90 RGIA, f. 323, op. 1, d. 597, l. 122.

91 Quested, "Matey" Imperialists?, 260.

92 *The Economist*, October 9, 1909, 12.

93 See Meyer, "Garden of Grand Vision," in particular 346–49.

94 RGIA, f. 323, op. 1, d. 597, l. 122.

95 See Vespa, *Secret Agent of Japan*.

presented above we might well conclude that they have at least three characteristics in common.

First, the activities of these persons were either situated on the border between semi-legality and illegality or they were unambiguously criminal. In many cases they already had criminal records in other states before appearing in Harbin and needed to relocate their activities to a different country for criminal or economic reasons. The motivation for their activities must have been mostly of a material nature. The people involved in these kinds of activities were characterized by a taste for adventurism and an openness to risks, which were most likely motivated more by necessity than by choice. Manchuria, and particularly Harbin with its status as a concession area of the CER, a treaty port full of legal-administrative complications, and characterized by international overlaps and disputes between jurisdictions, represented a space that, although not without laws, was nevertheless much freer and much less protected than usual nation-states; it was therefore ripe for the semi-legal and criminal activities of international adventurers.

Second, in all the highlighted cases the success of the dubious to criminal activities depended heavily on the ability of the persons to make use of the appropriate legal-administrative regulations and extraterritorial rights that prevailed in the international concession areas within China. Moreover, it was important to win over the respective city authorities or diplomatic representatives for themselves or for the relevant actions and to make these “subservient” to their needs. In order to obtain support for their purposes the described adventurers, shady characters, and criminals often operated under false identities and feigned serious entrepreneurial intentions. However, in many cases it is assumed that they simply pursued, and often achieved, their objectives with bribes.

And third, the ability of the persons and groups of people described to organize themselves into networks was at least as important as their familiarity with the legal-administrative conditions in Harbin and the railway zone. Both Russo-Chinese opium smuggling and white-slave traffic were examples of transnational, cross-border activities that necessitated the involvement and cooperation of various occupational groups from different nations. To achieve their goals the agents in our case studies did not just have enough criminal energy to see them through but also had the skills and competencies needed to act successfully in a transnational setting. The knowledge of the relevant languages and socio-cultural norms of different population groups – at least in general lines – were fundamental to navigating and acting within a specific cosmopolitan milieu. In this way, the protagonists of this study – shady characters and criminals who did their sinister businesses in or via Harbin – owned or developed specific transcultural know-how and made use of it in one way or another. These social practices and forms of knowledge transformed our shady and criminal characters into cosmopolitans, if we understand cosmopolitanism not in a normative but in an empirical way.

More generally, the activities on the “dark side” of Harbin life were often positioned within an international and occasionally global setting. Moreover, they were constituted by many contact zones where processes of exchange and cultural entanglements took place. The prostitution business and white-slave trade, gambling in casinos, and opium

smuggling demonstrate a high degree of transcultural entanglement with respect to ethnic or national composition, cooperation, and interaction. The characters presented here were in constant contact and exchange in one way or another with differing cultures, and they knew how to move within and between these. In fact, it is possible to go one step further and claim that their dubious and criminal activities, characterized by transcultural entanglement, were only possible in a cultural contact zone and political-administrative border city like Harbin. As Ulrich Beck would say, the day-to-day life of Harbin, which was ultimately shaped by numerous infringements and cultural border-crossings, can be referred to as a "cultural *mélange*" par excellence.⁹⁶ And, finally, most actors described in this study found themselves forced, to a certain extent, to live outside of their country of origin or even to cross borders regularly in order to make shady deals and avoid prosecution. Thus, Harbin was characterized by overlapping and changing prerogatives and blurred boundaries between various cultures, states, and political and administrative systems. Harbin provided – at least temporarily – a perfect place for shady characters and criminals who, through their activities, contributed to making it "the Chicago of the East."

96 See Ulrich Beck, *Der kosmopolitische Blick oder: Krieg ist Frieden* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2004) (*Cosmopolitan Vision*, trans. Ciaran Cronin, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 10.