



Russians from China: Migrations and Identity

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ABSTRACT:

In the first half of the 20th century, sizeable Russian communities lived in a number of Chinese cities, including Harbin, Shanghai and Tientsin. The largest and most diverse of these was the community that grew up around Harbin in north China. By the mid 1920s, Harbin was home to one of the largest Russian diaspora communities in the world, with over 120,000 Russians and other nationalities from the former Tsarist Empire. Moreover, many Russians in Shanghai and Tientsin had links to Harbin, as their first place of domicile in China. By the late 1950s, political transformations in China had driven almost all these people elsewhere. But for many of them, their roots in China became a key aspect of their identity in emigration in their new diasporas. This paper explores the background to this unique community and the geo-political forces underpinning the various waves of migration of Russians into and out of Harbin. It analyses the complex issues of identity and citizenship Russians faced while living in Harbin, their fates determined at various points in time by the dominance of three powers Russia, China and Japan. Drawing on the experience of my own family, whose life in Harbin and Manchuria spanned four generations over fifty years, it touches on the rich ethnic and cultural mix that lay beneath the surface of Russian Harbin, with particular reference to the Jewish community that once thrived there. Finally, it examines how the `Harbintsy perceive their identity in emigration and the recent changes in attitude towards them of the Chinese authorities.

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