White Emigres: A Look at the Russian Refugee Crisis of the 1920s

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History 391: Migration and the “New” Europe

Professor Miller
The fallout from WWI changed the map of the world, leading all the way up until the modern. Nations were created, and empires were dismembered. Perhaps the most memorable of these seismic changes is the founding of the USSR, begun by the overthrow of the government in 1917. Like many empires throughout Europe, the Tsar Nicholas was overthrown. However, what made the Russian Revolution different was that the Tsars were overthrown violently\(^1\), by contrast to the Kaiser in Germany and the Sultan in what would become Turkey.

Maybe it was because of the forceful nature of the coup, or the fact that those who fought against the Tsarist regime had very little cohesion once their common enemy was defeated, but Russia was still deeply unstable after the overthrow. Over the next few years, Russia broke out in Civil War between the Bolsheviks and everyone else. As the war progressed, and it became clear that the Bolsheviks would succeed, a huge influx of citizens fled Russia. While many were peasant farmers who were caught in the crossfire, but unlike many refugee crises, we see a lot of elites, both Civil and Military classes, fled Russia\(^2\).

The Russian refugees fled all over the world from Germany to China. These refugees became known as the White Emigres. We see similar trends in these countries to what appear in other cases of refugees. There is often a stigma against the Russians, particularly in Shanghai. However, as time passes, we begin to see integration and integration.

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even influence of the White Emigres, particularly in Germany. This becomes clear when we consider eyewitness stories we see a trend of integration, particularly with the elites. A good example is Ariadna Tyrkova-Williams who emigrated from Russia later in the war and later became a journalist in England and finally America. Through her eyes, we see a narrative of both the political fear in Russia during this time, and the fall out for the people who left.

To understand the White Emigres, we must first begin with the country that created them. Up until 1917, Russia was ruled the autocratic Tsars, the final one being Tsar Nicholas. However, the Tsar was deeply unpopular in his home country, particularly Moscow. There had been many attempts on his life, and the life of his aides, from both radical lower class groups, as well as elites.

In March 1917, during a worker’s strike that was being broken up by the heavily militarized Petrograd police, a revolution took hold. What began as a protest turned into a coup. The soldiers for the Tsar either fled or sided with the protesters, and the images of the Tsar were torn down all over the city. Tsar Nicholas was pressured to abdicate by military officials, and no one else would take the crown. On March 16, a provisional government was organized, much to the elation of the populace. This government was intended to be center left, and was only temporary until a whole administration could be developed. Among the members of this provisional government was Ariadna Tyrkova-Williams.

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This is where we see the issue with the Russian Revolution. While many different political groups hated the autocratic regime and wanted gone, that did not mean that they agreed on other ideologies. This is why as soon as the dust settles, and their common enemy is defeated, all the different groups begin to fracture, even inside the provisional government.

The Bolsheviks took power over the government, and due to their Red Guard, became known as the Reds. All those who opposed them became known as the Whites. This group included everyone from liberals in the provisional government to land owning, pro-monarchy elites. This is the side that Ariadna Tyrkova-Williams, the daughter of a landowner outside of Novgorod, fell on. Here we see the same issue that confronted the revolutionaries during the February Revolution. While they did not align over much, they agreed on a common enemy, and to some extent, that was enough.

The war that followed over the next three years, like all Civil Wars, tore through the country, displacing millions of people. Most of the people who were initially displaced were peasants and small landowners, since many of these battles were fought far away from the wealth of the West. These people would be considered victims according to the UNHCR definition. Other groups that were also displaced at this time were Russian Jews, and other ethnic minorities such as Poles and Chechens. In

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the modern UNHCR definition, the refugees would be considered targets, often being the victims of the violence and persecution. So the first refugees to flee Russia were not elites, and most moved either farther east into Manchuria and China, or south and west to Constantinople.

However, as it became clear that the Bolsheviks would win the Civil War, and began to encroach on the territory of the Whites, their armies fled. This is where it becomes interesting. In most refugee communities the average person is just that, an average person. They were people who were caught in the crossfire or were targeted for some reason. The end of the Russian Civil War, particularly in the years of 1919 and 1920, on the other hand, saw the fleeing of elites, both military and civilian, on a large scale.

Like the refugees before them, many of these elites fled to local countries, such as Manchuria, Germany, and Constantinople. However, since many of these newer refugees were elites, they had the means to actually to another country, even if it was farther away, rather than being forced to live in poverty or in a refugee camp. Ariadna Tyrkova-Williams was one such person, having moved to England from Russia, before moving to the United States later in life.

8 Source Later
Some may ask why the Russians, particularly poorer ones, would end up in Constantinople, where they were stuck in refugee camps that were noted for their squalor. Arthur Ringwald wrote in his analysis of the Russian refugee crisis that there were at the time “27,000 Russian Refugees” in “3,000 in hospitals or otherwise invalided”\textsuperscript{13}. This paints a picture of many sick, desperate refugees with nowhere to go. In fact, Ringwald asserts that the refugees need to be moved out of Constantinople as quickly as possible, even going so far as to use the word “evacuate”\textsuperscript{14}. So how did all these Russians end up here?

The Russians were not the only ones who faced the mass displacement of people in the wake of WWI. Perhaps the most significant were the refugees moving out of the Balkans and Greece, as well as what would soon become Turkey\textsuperscript{15}. Constantinople had the advantage of being in an area in relatively close proximity to all of these places, as well as being a large city that had the infrastructure to hold these people, making it an intuitive place for relief administration such as the Red Cross to settle them. Finally, while it is unclear of the agency of many of these poorer Russians, it is significant to note that Constantinople is considered the religious center of the

\textsuperscript{13} United States American Relief Administration. \textit{Bulletin}, Volumes 25-30. https://books.google.com/books?id=xLICAQAAMAAJ&pg=RA2-PA9&lpg=RA2-PA9&dq=first+hand+accounts+of+russian+refugees&source=bl&ots=pdpNGe_Vn2&sig=DlsDRbNOUg_z9xnhB0AUrSj_dDc&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi5oO_qu-fPAhWG4CYKHXU7DEsQ6AEIRDAH#v=onepage&q&f=false

\textsuperscript{14} United States American Relief Administration. \textit{Bulletin}, Volumes 25-30. https://books.google.com/books?id=xLICAQAAMAAJ&pg=RA2-PA9&lpg=RA2-PA9&dq=first+hand+accounts+of+russian+refugees&source=bl&ots=pdpNGe_Vn2&sig=DlsDRbNOUg_z9xnhB0AUrSj_dDc&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi5oO_qu-fPAhWG4CYKHXU7DEsQ6AEIRDAH#v=onepage&q&f=false

Orthodox Russian world\textsuperscript{16}. Many of those who were considered public enemies under Bolshevik rule were religious people such as Orthodox patriarchs, or even simply devout Orthodox Russians, who may have felt that their best second chance would be in the birthplace of their faith.

However, Constantinople did not become the home of most of these refugees. Even Arthur Ringwald recommends in his report that the Russians be moved out of the city as quickly as possible\textsuperscript{17}. Most were moved to Western Europe particularly England, where already established refugees such as Ariadna Tyrkova-Williams, formed organizations to help integrate or repatriate them, as needed\textsuperscript{18}. Some were moved even farther west into the United States, despite the fact that this was the same era that the United States instituted policies to restrict immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe.

But Constantinople was not the only place that the displaced Russians fled to. Since many of the battles of the Civil War were far to the East, even as deep as Siberia, many of the refugees, rather than braving the thousands of miles that it would take to reach Europe, moved to the countries bordering Russia to the East, such as Manchuria and China. Shanghai in particular saw a large arrival by sea\textsuperscript{19}, due to the cities reputation as a free port. Wang describes how in December of 1922 there was the


\textsuperscript{17} United States American Relief Administration. \textit{Bulletin, Volumes 25-30}. \url{https://books.google.com/books?id=xLICAQAMAAJ&pg=RA2-PA9&lpg=RA2-PA9&dq=first+hand+account+s+of+russian+refugees&source=bl&ots=pdpNGe_Vn2&sig=DIslDRbNOUg_z9xnhB0AuSrJ_dDc&hl=en&sa=X&sqi=2&ved=0ahUKEwi5oO_qu-fPAhWG4CYKHXU7DfEsQ6AEIRDABH#v=onepage&q&f=false}

\textsuperscript{18} Tyrkova-Williams, Ariadna. \textit{From Liberty to Brest-Litovsk, the First Year of the Russian Revolution}. London: Macmillan, 1919. \url{https://archive.org/details/fromlibertytobre00tyrkiala}

\textsuperscript{19} Source Later
appearance of an “unexpected arrival of an odd fleet, or more specifically, a motley collection of warships, mail ships, tugs, and icebreakers”\(^{20}\). This group was of military refugees fleeing from Vladivostok and the besieging Bolsheviks. The White Emigres of Shanghai covered all classes, with a small group of elites of every station. However, most were normal soldiers who simply had nowhere else to go.

In Shanghai, much like Constantinople, we are given an eyewitness description of the conditions that the Russians lived in. “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.”\(^{21}\) Here in Shanghai, more than anywhere else, we see a stigma developing against the Russians. In many ways, it’s not all that different than the typical stereotypes that large numbers of immigrants and refugees face whenever they come to a new country. There was the sense of the poverty and criminality that many associate with these new groups, and the White Emigres were no exceptions. The women in particular, were seen to be potential prostitutes\(^ {22}\), and jobs Russians were expected to take, while low level, were also gendered. While women were expected to be domestic servants, at best, the men were seen as either bodyguards or brick layers, perpetuating a stereotype of thuggishness.


Here, Wang writes what is perhaps one of the best descriptions and explanations of the stigmas that Russians faced in Shanghai\textsuperscript{23}. During this period, since Shanghai was a free port, there were many Europeans and Americans. These Westerners were most often holdovers from the Imperialist era of China. Most of the Westerners were of the highest echelon of Shanghai society. This would often be used as a justification for Social Darwinism. The Russians, living in poverty and taking jobs as bodyguards and prostitutes, in many ways threatened White superiority in the city. In addition, the Chinese and Russians historically had conflicts, and more often than not, Russia would act superior to China, so there was already a built in tension when the Russians came in.

In Constantinople, and as we will see, England and Western Europe, the prejudice was much more subdued. There was undoubtedly a sense of squalor in Constantinople, but not as much of a stigmatized racial superiority. In America, there was prejudice against Eastern Europeans, but the English did not have any of the same stereotypes. Part of this is a result of the fact that most of the Russians who came to England originally were of the noble class, since they were the ones who had the means to flee so far abroad and establish themselves. For instance, in the case of Ariadna Tyrkova-Williams, she became a respected journalist, and also founded organizations to help Russian Children.

But perhaps the White Emigres who had the most effect on the country that they moved to were the ones who moved to Germany and the young nation of Poland\textsuperscript{24}. When the Russians first fled west, Poland didn’t exist as a nation yet, and was instead split between the Russians, Germans and Austrians. Most of the Russians who fled west made their way into German Poland, as well as the hinterland of Germany, while the Russians who fled south towards Austria usually ended up in Constantinople.

Unlike in places such as Shanghai, there wasn’t a large stigma against the Russians in Germany. In fact, the White Emigres actually joined political groups. Most of these Russians, as one might imagine, opposed Communism. Many drifted into groups with Fascist leanings. One such group was led by a young man named Adolf Hitler\textsuperscript{25}. Hitler took much of his ideology of an Anti-Semitic global conspiracy from White Emigres, who had taken their Anti-Semitism from Russia.

In fact, In Hitler’s 1923 revolt, he cited the ideology of many of these Emigres, and some were even involved\textsuperscript{26}. While this revolt was unsuccessful, it was also crucial in formulating Hitler’s later ideology. As much as Nazis liked to paint themselves as an overtly German Nationalist party, they took more from immigrants than they care to admit.

What this experience tells us, is that the Russians were not simply helpless victims who things just happened to. For better or worse, they were able to influence

\textsuperscript{24} Kellogg, Michael Hitler’s "Russian" Connection: White Émigré Influence on the Genesis of Nazi Ideology, 1917-1923 \url{http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/groups/scr/kellogg.pdf}

\textsuperscript{25} Kellogg, Michael Hitler’s "Russian" Connection: White Émigré Influence on the Genesis of Nazi Ideology, 1917-1923 \url{http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/groups/scr/kellogg.pdf}

\textsuperscript{26} Kellogg, Michael Hitler’s "Russian" Connection: White Émigré Influence on the Genesis of Nazi Ideology, 1917-1923 \url{http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/groups/scr/kellogg.pdf}
their home countries. Many host countries have a tendency to view the refugees coming in as helpless victims without any ability for agency. However, as this shows, many of the White Emigres, as well as other refugees throughout history, show a type of agency that sometimes surprises many.

One good example of this is Ariadna Tyrkova-Williams, who is most likely one of the best known of the White Emigres. She was born in 1869 to a landowner outside of Novgorod, making her part of the landed upper class. She began her long history of the revolutionary activism in 1905 in the first revolt. Finally, in the wake of the February Revolution of 1917, she served in the government of Petrograd, eventually serving in the Duma. Tyrkova was an example of one of the higher class, borderline aristocratic Russians who would at one point become a White Emigres. When the Bolsheviks took power, Tyrkova followed General Denikin's army in the South. Several times between 1918 and 1920, Tyrkova moved between Russia and England, showing that she was of a more privileged background than many of the Russians who fled. During one of her trips between Russia and England, she wrote a book which described the first year of the Revolution. Here we see both her own political leanings, as well as some of the pressures that forced many of the refugees out of Russia.

Tyrkova left Russia for the last time in 1920, permanently moving to England. From there, she became a journalist, as well as a Human Rights Activist in the form of


the helping Russian orphans. She also founded the Russian Liberation Committee, which shows that she continued her political activism against the Bolsheviks. As a journalist, she would often write about both her own political leanings, and the refugee crisis, such as this one quote, “Never in the history of Europe has a political cataclysm torn such huge numbers of people from their mother country and from their homes”³⁰.

In Ariadna Tyrkova, we see an example of a refugee who fled Russia, but adapted easily enough to her new country when she arrived. But Tyrkova was a wealthy aristocrat, who married a British man, so her adjustment was most likely going to be easier. But what happened to other refugees?

The most stigma was faced by the Emigres in Shanghai, who were relegated to manual labor and lower station work. However, over the course of ten years, Russians were let into higher positions, and eventually just became another group of Westerners in the city³¹. In America, there was a quota of Eastern Europeans that prevented many from coming in, but both them and England did not have much in the way of institutionalized stigma, partially because many of the Emigres coming there were of the aristocratic class. Finally, many settled in what would become Poland, without much issue. The only crisis there came almost twenty years later with the invasion of the Nazis³², who ironically owed some of their roots to Emigres in their own country.

So over the course of this, we see that Russians were forced all over the globe, and some of where they went depended on their own social class. In some places, they

³¹ Source Later
faced serious stigma, while in others there was less of an issue of integration. However, it is notable that in almost every host country, the Russians became heavily influential, like the example of Ariadna Tyrkova, which speaks to the dynamism of refugees in their host countries.
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