

Tensions and Conflicts

11 Blagoveshchensk Massacre and Beyond: The Landscape of Violence in the Amur Province in the Spring and Summer of 1900

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Abstract This chapter discusses mass violence against Chinese in the valley of the Amur River in the summer of 1900, in particular in the context of settler colonialism and imperial management of populations. Unlike previous studies of the well-known Blagoveshchensk massacre of July 1900, the chapter casts this violence against the background of the debates on the presence of the Chinese in the Russian territory among various segments of imperial bureaucracy and society. It argues that, on the very eve of the violence, significant segments of that society favoured the presence of the Chinese merchants and workers. It was under the impact of the panic caused by the Boxer rebellion that the consensus was broken and mass violence erupted.

Mass violence erupted along the Amur River in the summer of 1900, an event that occurred in the context of the Boxer Rebellion in China and the subsequent invasion of Manchuria by the Russian imperial army. The Blagoveshchensk massacre of July 1900, in which thousands of Chinese dwellers of the city perished when forced to cross the river onto the Qing side of the border, remains largely underexplored in the broader context of the presence of Chinese labourers and merchants in the Russian Far East in the second half of the nineteenth century. These events have, so far, received relatively little attention from historians, and when they have, some studies of the Blagoveshchensk massacre (and all those in English) have been based on sources produced at least a decade after the events.¹ In this chapter, I want

- 1 For the most recent study in Russian (and the most exhaustive to date in any language), see collective monograph Diatlov, Guzei, and Sorokina, *Kitaiskii Pogrom*. For an English language study, see Zatsypine, “Blagoveshchensk Massacre.” For the most recent and detailed study in English, see Gamsa, *Harbin*, 22–26.

to focus on the archival evidence that illuminates not just the ways in which violence itself erupted in the moment of crisis in the imperial borderland but also the discussions about the presence of the Chinese in the Russian Empire. Tellingly, these discussions occurred practically on the eve of the July 1900 violence, from February to May of 1900, and involved different players, from military officers to Russian merchants, Cossacks, and peasants. I argue that, instead of a simple dichotomy between Russians and Chinese on the Amur, this evidence suggests a complex, diverse society that emerged in the context of settler colonialism and imperial borderland.² The unravelling of the Boxer rebellion—itself a reaction to imperialist inroads by Europeans in Qing China—taxed the precarious balance of interests and accommodations on the Russian–Chinese frontier.³ This balance, the product of imperial ad hoc policies, was broken when the pressure of war and mobilisation against the perceived threat of the Boxers combined with the nationalising messages of the Russian imperial centre. In some ways, the events on the Amur in the summer of 1900 foreshadowed the violence in the Western borderlands during World War I.⁴ To present this argument, I will first discuss the context of the Russian colonisation in the Far East, explore the events in July 1900 in Blagoveshchensk, and then complicate the massacre by surveying discussions among the Russian bureaucrats and local society members that preceded the massacre.

11.1 Context: The Russian Far East before 1900

The left bank of the Amur, home to the events discussed below, was officially incorporated into the Russian Empire through the Treaty of Aigun in 1858.⁵ The Amur province (*oblast'*) was established at the same time, with the capital in Blagoveshchensk. The city was named after the Blagoveshchenskii cathedral

2 For a recent study of the Russian–Chinese borderland on the tribute of the Amur, the Argun, see Urbansky, *Beyond the Steppe Frontier*. For a similar argument about the complex society that emerged in the zone of the Russian–Chinese interaction in Manchuria, see Gamsa, *Harbin*.

3 On the Boxer rebellion, see Esherick, *Origins*, esp. 271–314, for the discussion of the events in the spring of 1900. For the history of the military campaigns, see Lensen, *Russo-Chinese War*; Datsyshen, *Bokskerskaia Voina*.

4 For some recent scholarship on the violence during World War I, see Holquist, *Making War*; Lohr, *Nationalizing*.

5 Miasnikov, *Dogovornymi stat'iami utverdili*.

in Irkutsk, where Innokentii (Veniaminov), the Archbishop of Kamchatka and an active participant in the imperial politics of the Far Eastern borderlands, began his service. As was the case with the second Far Eastern province, the Maritime, initial colonisation of the region proceeded with the establishment of the Cossack stations along the Amur.⁶ More intense colonisation began in the 1880s and, especially, in the 1890s, when the construction of the Trans-Siberian brought more peasant settlers to the area;⁷ but as the railroad brought more people to the Amur region, it also pivoted the efforts of the Russian imperial state towards Qing Manchuria. Especially from 1898, when Russia leased Port Arthur for its military base and built Dalian (Dal'nii) for its commercial harbour on the Liaodong peninsula, the Amur province began to experience negative population growth.⁸

The Amur *oblast's* economy was based on two pillars. One, in terms of profit and volume the more important of the two, was gold mining. The second was agriculture, which was traditionally viewed by imperial administrators as the most important way to “Russify” the remote borderland. The gold mining industry took off in the 1850s, following the discoveries of gold deposits by the geologist N. P. Anosov.⁹ The gold industry remained in private hands, with the gold industrialists (*zlotopromyshlenniki*) residing first in Irkutsk and then, increasingly, in Blagoveshchensk. The gold industry was fairly underdeveloped, and the industrialists who purchased the rights to work particular sites (*priiski*) lacked substantial capital. They also preferred to invest as little as possible in the mining operations, and so they primarily relied on semi-independent brigades (*arteli*) of workers, from whom they purchased the extracted gold and to whom they sold supplies. Only a minor faction of the industrialists relied on the so called “master’s way” (*khoziainicheskii sposob*), where the industrialists fully supplied the hired workers, provided them with equipment, and paid them salaries.

The agriculture was similarly underdeveloped. For one, Cossack stations along the Amur were located in such a way as to facilitate postal communications rather than their success as agricultural settlements. Another factor was that Cossacks were obligated to provide military service and functioned as border guards, which did not facilitate their farming enterprises. New peasant settlers were often unfamiliar with the local conditions and struggled

6 Ivanov, *Kratkaia Istoriia*; Veniukov, “Vospominaniia.”

7 Marks, *Road to Power*.

8 *Vsepoddanneishii Otchet Priamurskogo*, 4–6.

9 Crawford, *Siberia*, 157–159.

to be self-sufficient, let alone supply the industry with food. A few highly successful farmers, mostly the followers of the Molokan sect, did not alter the general picture.¹⁰

The economic situation in the Amur province made transactions across the border with the Qing Empire a necessity. Not only did the Cossacks use pastures and forests across the river but they also bought supplies and hired labour there. The gold industry similarly relied on Chinese food and labourers. The cities, where the military garrisons were often the most important parts of the population, relied on Chinese merchants to supply them with necessities. While the Amur was notionally a border between the two empires, life along the Amur involved crossing that border in multiple ways. The Amur province, along with the Maritime, Transbaikal, and Yakut provinces in Eastern Siberia, was covered by the so-called *porto franco* regime of free trade. Moreover, according to the treaties of Aigun of 1858 and Beijing of 1860, trade in the fifty-mile-wide zone along the border between China and Russia remained duty-free. The imperial authorities considered the duty-free trade and the *porto franco* regime as key elements in the development of the remote and thinly populated areas.

Prior to 1884, the Amur province was part of the governor-generalship of Eastern Siberia, with the capital in Irkutsk. In 1884, the new Priamur governor-generalship was established. The governor general resided in Khabarovsk, at the confluence of Amur and Ussuri.¹¹ Following the administrative reform of 1884, the Russian authorities launched a campaign to document Chinese and Koreans in the Russian Far East. They began to demand national passports with visas and taxed Chinese workers and merchants by forcing them to acquire a permit to work or trade in Russia. While the enforcement of the regulations remained sporadic, it also gave local officials extensive powers over the Chinese workers and merchants. Moreover, the campaign solidified the anti-Chinese rhetoric, which depicted the Chinese workers and merchants as a harmful presence, albeit—for the time being—a necessary one.¹²

The situation in the Amur province was also unique in that it contained a Chinese exclave. Blagoveshchensk is located at the confluence of Zeia and Amur rivers and is on the left bank of the latter and the right bank of the former. On the left bank of Zeia (and on the left bank of Amur, downstream

10 *Vsepoddanneishii Otchet Priamurskogo*, 5; Kriukov, *Opyt Opisaniia*; Korzhinskii, “Otchet ob issledovaniiakh”; Argudiaeva, “Molokans.”

11 Matsuzato, “Creation.”

12 Glebov, “Between Foreigners and Subjects.”

from the city) was the region of “Trans-Zeia Manchus” (*zazeiskie manchzhury*), or, as the Qing authorities called it, the sixty-four villages. The settlements, populated by about 20,000 Chinese and Manchus, remained under Qing administration but on the Russian side of the border following the provisions of the Treaty of Aigun in 1858. In the course of the 1880s and, especially, the 1890s, Russian authorities tried to devise various ways to subject the Trans-Zeia Manchus to the Russian administration. These efforts were largely fruitless, and the Manchus remained under the Qing administration until the ethnic cleansing of July 1900, when they were forced to flee across the river or be killed.

The pan-imperial developments influenced the remote borderland in multiple ways. For one, the nationalising empire of Alexander II and Nicholas II sought to transform the imperial polity with its attending diversity into a Russian state. The presence of “foreigners” such as the Chinese was no longer the norm but a deviation. Instead of incorporation into the fabric of imperial polity as an estate, they were now seen as foreign subjects to be excluded from the system of mosaic subjecthood described by Jane Burbank as an “imperial rights regime.”¹³ For instance, in December 1899, Nicholas II as the chairman of the Committee of the Siberian Railroad personally intervened in discussions about peasant colonisation and resettlement and expressed his opinion that “in view of the desirability of strengthening the Russian fortress against the flood of the yellow race it should be possible to increase peasant colonisation.”¹⁴ The new rhetoric coming from the imperial capital saw the Priamur Krai, in the words of its first governor general, Baron A. N. Korf, as “not a colony but a part of the metropole with which it is connected by overland routes.”¹⁵ The Priamur Krai was supposed to become the domain of the Russians along with the rest of the empire.

In the economic sphere, the rhetoric of nationalisation was paralleled by the introduction of protective tariffs, the unification of the customs regime along the borders, and the privileging of the development of Russian commerce and industry. Although Sergei Witte’s programme, which included the protective tariffs, was seen as a modernising initiative, it is important to realise that it was also an element of the homogenising and nationalising drive of the late imperial period. In the imperial Far East, discussions of protective tariffs and of privileging Russian commerce reinvigorated the already

13 Burbank, “Imperial Rights Regime.”

14 Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv Dal’nego Vostoka (hereafter, RGIA DV), f. 701, op. 1, d. 339, l. 30.

15 *S’ezd Gubernatorov, 1885*, 1–2.

existing tensions. Beginning in the mid-1880s, likely as a result of colonisation by settlers from the Western borderlands who brought with them familiar mental maps of internal Other, Russian press and bureaucratic reports began to compare the Chinese in the Far East to Jews in European Russia, ascribing to them such features as cunning, hermetic communal life, and tendency to exploit the peasant.¹⁶ This anti-Chinese rhetoric was likely influenced by the campaign in 1892–1895 to expel Jews who resided in the Russian Far East. Already in 1892–1893, Russian merchants were petitioning the authorities to limit Chinese commerce administratively because they were failing to compete with the Chinese, allegedly due to the unique racial characteristics of their competitors. Repeatedly in the 1890s, Russian authorities discussed limiting Chinese labour in the Russian Far East and privileging “Russian” workers, a task that was always complicated by the demographic feebleness of Russians in the Far East.

11.2 The Manchurian Expansion, the Boxer Rebellion, and the Blagoveshchensk Massacre

The construction of the Trans-Siberian railroad precipitated Russian expansion into Manchuria. As the Chinese Eastern Railroad (CER) cut through Manchuria, Russian technical personnel and troops poured into Qing Dongbei (three northeastern provinces).¹⁷ In 1898, the Russian Empire leased land in Liaodong peninsula and established Port Arthur as its military base and Dalian (*Dal'ni*) as its commercial harbour. The imperial encroachment by Europeans into China triggered the Boxer Rebellion, inspired by social protests against Qing authorities and foreign presence. Qing authorities wavered but supported the rebels and declared war on the intervening powers on June 21, 1900. Soon, the Russian authorities mobilised the reservists in the Priamur Krai and sent troops across the border into Manchuria, where Qing-loyal troops and the Boxers operated together. As the military intervention of the eight powers proceeded in Tianjin and Beijing, chaos reigned in Manchuria.¹⁸

On July 2, 1900, Qing troops or Boxers fired on Blagoveshchensk from across the river, at the location of the Manchu village Sakhalian (roughly,

16 Glebov, “Foreigners and Subjects,” 114–115.

17 Wolff, *Harbin Station*.

18 A good overview of the military operations during the Boxer rebellion in Manchuria is Datsyshen, *Bokskerskaia Voina*.

modern Heihe). The bombardment by grenades caused little physical damage in the city, but it did throw the population and the authorities into panic. The military governor of the province (the supreme official), General K. N. Gribskii, was not present in the city. At the head of the troops, he crossed the river to proceed down the Amur and attack Aigun on the other side. Although the civilian governor, S. N. Taskin, was in the city, it appears neither he nor the head of the city government, A. V. Kirillov, made any appearances. Some city dwellers fled the city and hid in the forested hills, while some remained and gathered in churches and with their neighbours. At that moment, the city was also home to about 1,300 troops, most of whom were the newly mobilised reservists who came from the city dwellers and peasant settlers. Among the city population were about 4,000 Chinese merchants, craftsmen, petty traders, and menial labourers.¹⁹

The archival trail present in a number of files on the retrospective investigation of these events allows us to fairly accurately reconstruct their sequence. The order to deport the Chinese dwellers of the city across the river must have been given by the military governor, General Gribskii, either because he suspected the Chinese of being disloyal or because he wanted to protect them from the wrath of the Russians. A newspaper account by N. P. Makeev, a co-owner and director of the Amur Steamboat Society, claimed that Gribskii was bothered by panicked members of the city *duma*, who requested that he recall the troops from Manchuria to protect Blagoveshchensk. According to Makeev, the members of the *duma* also demanded from Gribskii the removal of Chinese from the city, citing rumours about Chinese plans to set the city on fire.²⁰ In response to inquiries from the commander of the Priamur military district, S. N. Taskin, vice-governor of the Amur *oblast*, reported on July 30 1900 that “in light of acute animosity against the Chinese from the city dwellers there appeared a mass of requests to free the city from the Chinese who lived there, allegedly because the latter were planning to put the city on fire. As a consequence, the Governor ordered to gather all the Chinese and to send them across the Amur.”²¹

The chief of Blagoveshchensk police, a certain L. F. Batorevich, reported that he had initially planned to send the group across the Zeia River to the region of Trans-Zeia Manchus, “where they could get help from their own and

19 A reliable (albeit politically charged against the Russian authorities) account is Deich, *Krovavye Dni*.

20 Makeev, “Blagoveshchenskaia Panika.”

21 RGIA DV, f. 701, op. 1, d. 34, l. 11.

cross the Amur.”²² However, according to Batorevich, the governor rejected this plan (presumably, they were in communication), so the chief of police “assembled up to 1,500 Chinese” and sent them with the *pristav* Shabanov to the Cossack settlement Verkhne-Blagoveshchenskii near the city.²³ The party, accompanied by two Cossacks, volunteers Leveiko and Regishchevskii, and some eighty mobilised reservists, arrived in the settlement and conveyed to the Cossack settlement headman, a certain Kosyrev, the order of the Cossack administration to provide the party with boats to cross the river. Kosyrev refused to do so, claiming that no Cossacks would accompany the Chinese under the bullets from the other side and arguing that the boats could be used by the Chinese in the other direction to attack the Russian side. From the reports by Batorevich, Shabanov, Kosyrev, and others, it is not clear who decided to force the Chinese to cross the river by swimming, but someone did. As Kosyrev reported, they refused at first, but “after I applied stricter measures (*strogiye mery*) they complied.”²⁴ The group was forced into the river. According to multiple reports, the Cossacks then fired on the Chinese and forced them into the river, where most people drowned. The same operation, but with different participants and smaller groups, was conducted on July 8 and 10. Although the reports by officials claimed that “some Chinese may have drowned,” investigations confirmed that most of the Chinese from the assembled party perished during the forced crossing. A few days later, a group of armed Chinese crossed the river from Aigun and attacked a Cossack post. In response, the Russian Cossacks and peasants attacked the Manchu villages on the Zeia and burned most of them. Some of the inhabitants of the villages fled, and some were killed by Cossacks and militia, ending the Qing exclave on the imperial territory.

Although the retrospective accounts, including the one by Lev Grigor’evich Deich, a socialist who lived in exile in Blagoveshchensk and worked for the newspaper *Amurskii krai*, blamed the violence against the Chinese in the city on the authorities, it appears that much of the violence was not organised or directly contradicted orders given by Gribskii (who, as early as June 14, issued a proclamation prohibiting violence against Chinese and Manchus).²⁵ Gribskii’s proclamation specifically cited “rude violence against Chinese and Manchus living in Blagoveshchensk, especially at the hands of lower ranks of

22 Sorokina, “Blagoveshchenskaia Utopia,” 137.

23 Ibid., 135.

24 Ibid., 132.

25 RGIA DV, f. 701, op. 1, d. 347, l. 2.

mobilised reservists.”²⁶ As a matter of fact, eyewitnesses described scenes of violence both in Blagoveshchensk itself, where the Chinese dwellers of the city were rounded up and escorted to the point of the massacre, and outside the city, where Chinese passengers were attacked on the steamers embarking at Cossack stations, or on the roads when Chinese workers were returning from the gold mines. One eyewitness account, titled *Blagoveshchensk Diary* and published in the newspaper *Vostochnyi vestnik* in Vladivostok on August 27, 1900, described the following scene in Blagoveshchensk:

I enter the embankment and see an acquaintance. He says: Well, gentlemen, hell knows what’s going on! I walk on the Grafskaja street and see two appropriately dressed Chinese riding a cab and carrying two large parcels. At once two mounted Cossacks catch up with them, swearing and yelling, the cabman stops. “Where are you taking this scum?” yells the Cossack, and a thick rain of whips fell on the shoulders of the scared Chinese. The poor things tried to run but the Cossacks catch them and tie their queues together and take them somewhere. Where to? I don’t know, but the parcels remained with the cabman, and the policeman ran up and they began to untie the parcels [...]

The account in *Vostochnyi vestnik* described the process of removal of Chinese from the city:

By the evening [of July 2] they marched somewhere towards Zeia all the Chinese who lived and worked in the city. The crowd of these Chinese was very large, sixty *sazhen* [about 120 metres] long and five *sazhen* [about ten metres] wide. They were accompanied by volunteers armed with all sorts of makeshift weapons, rifles, axes, iron forks, sticks, etc. It was a pity to watch this huge but, helas, powerless crowd timidly observing those Russians who passed by [...] [Russian] crowds met them with militant yelling and with a kind of popular-cynical laughter. [...] There was no compassion. Even children and teenagers were communicated this belligerent spirit. In a large dried up ditch by the Seminary they threw entire piles of blue Chinese jackets and pants [...] Children, playing Cossacks, gathered in the ditch and began to frantically hit the clothes [...]

26 Ibid.

Scenes of this kind, reported in multiple accounts, suggest the prevalence of popular violence during the panic days of the bombardment. Following the events of July, *Amurskii kraï* published an article by N. P. Makeev, the owner of the Amur Shipping Company, who accused the local authorities primarily of panic and disorderly conduct during the eruption of violence. Makeev pointed out that, when the city was first bombarded from the Chinese side, the city mayor (*gorodskoi golova*) “was nowhere to be found.” Makeev also described how the city *duma* decided to distribute the rifles from the warehouse to the population. Instead of giving them in an organised manner to the battalion of reservists, a certain P. P. Popov,²⁷ a member of the mayor’s administration, distributed them to anyone, and consequently, 600 rifles and fifty pieces of ammunition per rifle came into the hands of city dwellers, reservists, and peasant settlers, all of whom were idle and riled up by the continued shooting at the city from the other side.

Challenging the argument that the violence was the result of the authorities’ actions alone, the archival collection of the retrospective investigations reveals that, beyond what happened in Blagoveshchensk proper, Chinese became targets of attacks in the rural region along the Amur. For instance, on August 18, 1900, Kovalevskii, the procurator of the Irkutsk Justice Chamber, reported to Governor General N. I. Grodekov the disturbing facts he learned while passing through the Cossack station Poiarkova. The procurator explained that “according to the information that became known to me, allegedly in past July the local station headman demanded that 42 Chinese be taken off the passing steamer *Saratov*. They were mostly merchants who travelled with their merchandise to Blagoveshchensk. They were on the orders of the same headman taken to the edge of the station where they were shot by the local Cossacks. Allegedly the described murders were conducted following the orders from [the provincial capital] Blagoveshchensk.”²⁸ When the governor general inquired of the Amur province governor Gribskii whether this information could be confirmed, Gribskii first dismissed the information as based on rumours but, following an investigation by the officer Tuzlukov, confirmed the account.²⁹

News of the massacres on the Amur were reported and discussed quite freely in the regional press. Newspapers in Blagoveshchensk, Vladivostok, and

27 Petr Petrovich Popov (1857–1928), merchant and banker, member of various Orthodox religious societies. Member of the city administration (1884–1914), head of the city administration of Blagoveshchensk in 1911–1914.

28 RGIA DV, f. 701, op. 1, d. 347, l. 15.

29 *Ibid.*, l. 18.

Nikol'sk-Ussuriiskii published accounts of the events with harrowing details. By late August, press in the capitals also noticed, and so did the imperial government. On September 2, 1900, Prince P.D. Sviatopolk-Mirsky, then deputy minister of internal affairs, telegraphed the governor general about an article in the newspaper *Novoe vremia*, which had alleged mass killings of Chinese in Amur province and claimed those killings resulted from the orders of a local sheriff. When the request for information reached the governor of the Amur province, he first denied the reports but then confirmed that a sheriff named Volkov had given orders to peasant militias formed in July to “annihilate all Chinese.” The governor first argued that no consequences had resulted from the orders and that Volkov had explained that he only meant attacking armed and hostile Chinese. Further investigations, however, proved that sheriff (*pristav*) Volkov had been asked by the village elders in charge of peasant militia how they should deal with the Chinese who fell into their hands, and he had ordered them to “annihilate” (*unichtozhat*) them.³⁰ This episode—one of the few we have on the situation in the region of Trans-Zeia Manchus—helps reconstruct the mechanisms of violence against the Manchus and their destruction. Peasant militias (a single one from Krasnoiarskii district numbered one hundred) were given orders by local officials to attack and destroy Chinese and Manchus.

But even if local administration was disorganised, displayed animosity towards the Chinese, or at times even gave orders to attack Chinese civilians, in many instances material interest also played a role. The ethnic cleansing of Chinese and Manchus left significant material wealth, from the warehouses in the city to harvest in the fields or other property in the countryside. For instance, the eyewitness account published in *Vostochnyi vestnik* described people pulling bodies from the river and robbing them.³¹ *Amurskii krai*, which was based in Blagoveshchensk, mentioned new settlers harvesting the former lands of Manchus beyond Zeia in September. The same newspaper also mentioned a brick factory left by a Trans-Zeia Manchu owner with over ten thousand bricks in the warehouse, which were quickly appropriated by local peasants.³² The war and chaos were viewed as a license to take possession of the property of the “enemy.”

To sum up, the landscape of violence against the Chinese in July 1900 included attacking passengers of steamers on the Amur, city dwellers in

30 Ibid., 15–18, 51–52.

31 *Vostochnyi vestnik*, August 27, 1900.

32 *Amurskii krai*, August 13, 1900, 2.

Blagoveshchensk, Chinese living and working in villages next to settlers, and, finally, the inhabitants of the sixty-four Manchu villages beyond the Zeia River. The attacks were conducted by mobilised Cossacks and reservists in the city and by peasant militias and Cossacks in the countryside. It appears that these attacks were often conducted under the guidance of local officials, such as Cossack station headmen, sheriffs, and peasant elders, and thus involved more actors than just the authorities, as the liberal press in Saint Petersburg alleged a decade later. Rather, one can speak of an explosion of mass violence in a moment of crisis and panic triggered by the war, mobilisation, and fear. But was this violence a result of some long-brewing hatreds? In the following pages, I will focus on the discussions about the Chinese presence in the Amur province, which were conducted by the local authorities on the very eve of the violence.

11.3 On the Eve of the Violence

This eruption of violence against the Chinese in the Amur province raises a question about the relations between different groups of Russian settlers and the Chinese along the Amur. Was this violence evidence of massive tensions and interethnic conflicts? One remarkable source that we can consider comes from the debates about Chinese presence in the province that occurred in the spring of 1900, on the very eve of the killings in July 1900, and that included very different representatives of Russian settler society.

The debates themselves were the result of the initiative from the top to limit the Chinese presence. According to the logic of Nicholas II's nationalising empire, the colonial borderland was supposed to be Russified, and the Russians in the Amur province were the "bastion against the influx of the yellow race." In early 1900, Governor General Grodekov told the governors of the Amur and Maritime provinces to follow the emperor's will and introduce measures to limit the Chinese competition with Russians. In the Amur province, a commission was created with representatives from officialdom, merchants, industrialists, Cossacks, and even peasants (sic!) to discuss the role of Chinese in the region. Officially, it was named the Commission on the Question of Taxing Chinese and Koreans Who Are Arriving in Russia with Fees, and it first gathered on January 21, 1900. Chaired by Border Commissar Kolshmit, the commission explored various aspects of Chinese trade and labour.³³

33 RGIA DV, f. 704, op. 1, d. 339, ll. 44–47.

According to the report presented by Kolshmit to the governor of the province, the commission established that in 1896, the Amur province had 16,410 Chinese and 1,531 Koreans; in 1897, 10,289 Chinese and 1,188 Koreans; and in 1898, 19,992 Chinese and 1,542 Koreans. It should be noted that in 1899, the population of the province was just over 126,000, with 38,000 people living in Blagoveshchensk. The commission pointed out that these numbers did not include Trans-Zeia Manchus “due to their special status” and that the numbers were likely lower than reality due to poor registration.³⁴ The commission suggested that two thirds of Chinese who arrived in the Amur province came to work at the gold industry sites, the next sizeable group was hired as agricultural labour by Cossacks and settlers, and the smallest groups worked as domestic servants, craftsmen, and traders. The income of Chinese workers was one ruble per day in agriculture and fifty kopecks per day in domestic service. Workers in the gold industry could earn 300 to 400 rubles a year selling gold at 2–2.88 rubles per *zlotnik* (4.26 grams). According to the commission’s data, Chinese workers—undemanding, sober, and modest in their lifestyle—spent between fifteen and twenty-five kopecks a day to maintain themselves.³⁵ The commission similarly analysed the presence of Chinese businesses in the province and found that, in 1898 in Blagoveshchensk, there were 138 Chinese merchants (those with stores, as the commission was unable to count peddlers) with the volume of trade reaching 1,262,900 rubles per annum. Cossack stations housed seven Chinese stores with a volume of 38,000 rubles, and peasant settler villages housed eight Chinese stores with a volume of 18,800 rubles.³⁶

The commission members, which included representatives of the trading houses Churin & Co. and Kunst & Albers, the two most important European retail companies in the region, argued that Chinese presence in commerce was undoubtedly valuable for the region. Members pointed out that the entire volume of Chinese commerce in the Amur *oblast’* was less than two million rubles, whereas Churin & Co. alone pulled 3.5 million rubles annually, which demonstrated that fears about unfair Chinese competition were groundless.³⁷ Participants from the gold-mining industry claimed that it was Chinese labour that made gold extraction feasible in the Amur province. In a report specifically prepared for the commission, gold industrialists claimed

34 Ibid., l. 41.

35 Ibid., ll. 42–43.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., ll. 49–52.

that, of 145 gold mining sites in the Amur mining district, 136 operated on the so called “*zlotnik* method” (when industrialists functioned essentially as buyers of gold mined by independent *arteli* of workers), and only nineteen had elements of the “master’s method,” where the industrialists fully supplied the workers and paid them salaries. At the *zlotnik*-method sites, in ninety percent of cases, the workers were Chinese. Accordingly, in 1899, out of 380 *puds* of gold mined in the Amur mining district, more than 230 *puds* were mined by Chinese workers. Any limits on Chinese labour, the industrialists claimed, would lead to a drastic contraction of gold mining in the region.³⁸ Cossack and peasant representatives, in their turn, argued that without Chinese labour, the development of agriculture was “unthinkable” and that, should Chinese labour be limited by state regulations, the amount of ploughed land would decrease by five to ten times. They argued that Cossacks currently hired about 1,200 seasonal Chinese workers and peasants hired over 2,000 of them annually. Since Russian workers demanded one and a half times as much payment and required more expensive maintenance, Chinese labour was crucial for the agriculture of the region.³⁹

Overall, the commission agreed that “at the present time in a thinly populated province like the Amur the Chinese presence is useful and necessary.” As the report to the governor argued, “after a series of lively discussions the commission found that [...] the thinly populated Amur province receives inexpensive labour, peasants and Cossacks can work a larger amount of land, city population has a chance to find a cheap domestic worker, and the gold industry exploits larger areas and extracts more gold. Finally, in trade the Chinese lower the prices by influencing the Russian merchants due to their undemanding life.”⁴⁰ The commission dismissed the arguments of P. P. Popov, a member of the mayor’s administration (who would “distinguish” himself during the violence in July) who argued that the Chinese were engaging in unfair competition, misusing the free trade regime, and smuggling illegal substances across the border. In a stunning display of liberalism, A. V. Kirillov, the mayor of Blagoveshchensk, argued that “competition with the Chinese is even useful for the Russian worker as it helps develop in him those qualities that are particular to the yellow race and constitute its strengths, such as its hard-working habits, sobriety, and accuracy.”⁴¹

38 Ibid., l. 56.

39 Ibid., l. 56.

40 Ibid., ll. 43–44.

41 Ibid., l. 45.

The commission argued as follows:

The Chinese are the regulators of prices for the immediate life necessities which works well for the interests of the fairly numerous group of the population of the Amur province, such as employees of various state agencies, officers, clergy, physicians, and teachers [...] This entire mass which in Blagoveshchensk forms a larger percentage of the population than elsewhere is no doubt interested in the cheap labour and low cost of various first necessity products since they help lower the cost of life in the province.⁴²

Perhaps not surprisingly given that the commission itself was dominated primarily by state officers, this conclusion was also reflected in the commission's final request to the higher authorities. Members of the commission asked that the fees for the tickets for the right to live and work on the Russian side not be raised for the Chinese. Moreover, the commission requested that part of the proceeds from the fees be spent on organising hospitals that could treat Chinese workers.⁴³

Given that the commission in Blagoveshchensk laboured practically on the eve of the eruption of mass violence against the Chinese in July of 1900, how can we explain its positive views of the Chinese and its enthusiastic endorsement of the presence of Chinese labour and commerce? Even more so, given the push from the top—from the monarch himself—to limit “the yellow race” in the Russian Far East, the commission's conclusions seemed to be especially out of sync with the discourses in Saint Petersburg. By way of conclusion, I would like to offer some suggestions as to how we can understand the violence of July 1900 in the context of the above rationalisation of the Chinese presence in the Amur province.

We can begin by noting that the commission that gathered in the winter and spring of 1900 represented the interests of particular stake-holders, who were in many ways dependent on Chinese labour. For instance, the large trading houses, such as Churin & Co and Kunst & Albers, were the last among the Russian mercantile community to feel the competition with the Chinese merchants. It was really those in small retail and craftsmen who had to compete and who often lost in competition with the Chinese merchants; it was the representatives of small retail who continuously petitioned

42 Ibid., l. 50.

43 Ibid., l. 46.

the Russian authorities to limit the presence of Chinese commerce and accused the Chinese of various transgressions. Similarly, the “peasants” invited to join the commission were not rank-and-file settlers who searched for cash jobs after arrival. For instance, A. V. Lankin, a member of the Molokan community, would have easily compared to a noble estate owner in European Russia. His landholding had 300 *desiatins* of ploughed land and twenty-two *desiatins* of fruit gardens, and he owned thirty-five horses and thirty-eight head of cattle. Lankin’s estate—his official peasant status notwithstanding—hired dozens of workers annually, all of them Chinese.⁴⁴

Most of the people who committed violence in the course of events in July 1900, on the other hand, were town dwellers, peasant settlers, Cossacks, and reservists (who were also mostly drawn from peasant settlers). Most of them likely saw Chinese workers and traders as direct competitors for jobs and markets. We know from petitions to the governor general of the Priamur Krai in 1892–1893 that a substantial number of retail merchants in the Amur region saw the Chinese as the main cause for the decline of their businesses. Their views of the Chinese presence thus differed from those held by the representatives of grand trading houses who took part in the work of the commission. Similarly, many new settlers who arrived in the Amur province in the 1890s were deeply disappointed. Expecting a limitless supply of good land, they found a region with very difficult climatic conditions and practically no good land in the vicinity of transportation routes. The land along the Amur was already allocated to the Cossacks. Described by a contemporary scholar as “the best and most desirable land in the area,” the fertile steppe-like zone between the rivers Zeia and Bureia was occupied by Trans-Zeia Manchus. Newly arrived settlers either had to travel for hundreds of miles to the north or to hire themselves out to the old settlers in the hope of getting inscribed into an existing Russian peasant commune. Old settlers—wealthy landowners—preferred Chinese labourers, who demanded less in pay and moved away for the winter. It is probably not a surprise that, in 1897–1899, more peasants left the Amur province than came to settle in it.

These divisions within the Russian settler society were the products of colonial venture and generated multiple tensions. The sense of entitlement to land and state support that characterised the newly arrived settlers clashed with the realities on the ground. The eruption of hostilities during the Boxer rebellion presented an opportunity to display one’s belonging to the “ruling people”—that “bastion of Russianness against the influx of the yellow race”

44 Smirnov, *Priamurskii Krai*, 103.

that Nicholas II was talking about—but also to acquire substantial material wealth. To be sure, following the eruption of violence and the ethnic cleansing of the Amur province, things got back to “normal” for almost two decades. The colonial project continued to rely on the massive supply of Chinese labour and on Chinese commerce until the revolutionary transformations of 1917 and the Civil War created an entirely new set of dispositions on Russia’s colonial frontier.

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