CHAPTER SEVEN

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND RACE IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA:
PIL’NIAK’S TRAVELOGUES FROM JAPAN AND CHINA

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This chapter seeks to shed new light on the racial construction of Russian identity vis-à-vis Asia in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution. While the October Revolution of 1917 aimed to achieve a complete reshaping of society, current scholarship shows that there were a number of significant overlaps between Tsarist Russia and the new regime, particularly in relation to studies of the Orient.¹ The context of the present study must therefore depart from pre-revolutionary discourses on race and the place of Asia within them.

The notion of race in Russian public and academic discourses has probably been one of the most understudied aspects of Russian identity. According to one of the few comprehensive works devoted to analyzing the dominant understanding of race among physical anthropologists in the Russian Empire, the “liberal anthropology of imperial diversity” was one of its main features.² That is to say, the liberal and ostensibly objective mainstream studies of race that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century were free from attempts to discover a pure racial type and to ascribe certain inherent qualities to the peoples that inhabited the Empire, including Russians.³ According to this worldview, the multiethnic Empire was seen as a “huge patchwork quilt in which every scrap was painted with a number of fusing colors.”⁴ The main focus, however, was on the people that resided within the borders of the Empire. Thus, the non-hierarchical classification of races and the rejection of pure racial categorization corresponded with the broader idea of the Russian Empire as a European nation-state that guided the liberal anthropologists in their analysis.⁵

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¹ E.g., Tolz, 2008.
² Mogilner, 2008: 108.
³ Mogilner, 2008.
⁴ Mogilner, 2005: 300.
⁵ Mogilner, 2005: 300.
Like any human taxonomy, however, the concept of “race” introduced to Russia from Europe in mid-nineteenth century had the potential to develop into a normative and subsequently hierarchical discourse, uniting and mobilizing the collective racial “self” as opposed to the threatening “Others.” With the possible exception of state endorsed anti-Semitism this potential of “race” was rarely utilized by the ruling elites in the domestic context. It did, however, appear in public discourse in the context of Russia’s conflictual relations with its neighbors in the Far East. ‘Conflict’ meant not only the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05, or the debates regarding Russia’s expansion into China, but also the perceived danger from mass emigration of Chinese, Koreans and Japanese to Russia’s Far East. Thus, it is possible to argue that China and Japan played a decisive role in the construction of Russians as a ‘white’ race.

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Admittedly, the hierarchical and dichotomous juxtaposition of “white” Russia with “yellow” Asia as it vividly features, for example, in the writings of the nationalist anthropologist Ivan Sikorsky, was not the only Russian strand of thought concerning Asia. The “Asianist” approach, which also emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century and appealed to Russia’s Asian roots was another influential strand of thought. It should be noted, however, that the efforts to Europeanize Russia initiated by Peter the Great in the eighteenth century did not result in Russia’s integration into Europe. The continuous “otherness” of Russia in European discourse, combined with the search for a distinctive Russian identity among Russian intellectuals who reflected on European debates about Russia but also on Russia’s undeniable historical and geographical links to Asia, gave birth to endless domestic debates about Russia’s identity. “Europe” served as the main “other” for both strands of discourse, Westernizing and the Slavophile alike. “Asianism,” which can be seen as an offshoot of Slavophilism also exerted a certain influence on Russian elites in late nineteenth century. Deriving from the belief that Russia’s origin is Asian and

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6 For these various themes, see Mikhailova, 2008; Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, 2001: 35; Stolberg, 2004.
7 See Sikorsky, 2002 [1904].
8 See Becker, 1991: 49.
9 Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, 2001: 42–60; Laurelle, 2005: 122–133.