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# Stitched Together: The Singer Manufacturing Company and Its Employees in Revolutionary Russia, 1914-1930

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STITCHED TOGETHER: THE SINGER MANUFACTURING COMPANY AND ITS  
EMPLOYEES IN REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA, 1914-1930

by

Jenna Himsl

A Thesis Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
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Master of Arts

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at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

May 2017

## ABSTRACT

### STITCHED TOGETHER: THE SINGER MANUFACTURING COMPANY AND ITS EMPLOYEES IN REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA, 1914-1930

by

Jenna Himsl

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2017  
Under the Supervision of Professor Christine Evans

In 1914, the Russian Empire was the largest foreign market of the Singer Manufacturing Company. Following the Russian Revolution, Singer's Russian subsidiary, Kompaniya Singer, was nationalized in a piecemeal fashion. Singer's employees were forced to adapt to the new order or attempt to leave Soviet Russia. This thesis addresses the ways in which Kompaniya Singer and its employees built, used, fostered, and hampered national and institutional identities during the chaotic period from 1914 to 1930 in their quests to respond to the shifting political foundations of Russian society. As it became impossible for Kompaniya Singer and its cosmopolitan, managerial employees to adapt to the nationalist and Bolshevik changes of the early twentieth century, they relied on each other for stability and aid. This thesis explores the causes, expressions, and extent of this mutual reliance. This mutual reliance amid adversity adds a new dimension to corporation-employee relationships—especially the concept of corporate company men—and complicates discussions of identity.

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As an archival student, I understand the irreplaceable value of a knowledgeable archivist, and I am greatly indebted to the archival staff at both the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and the National Archives at College Park. In particular, I wish to thank Abigail Nye, Heidi Anoszko, and the student staff of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Area Research Center.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

In 1904, the House of Singer (*Dom Kompanii Zinger*) opened across from the Kazan Cathedral on St. Petersburg's Nevsky Prospect.<sup>1</sup> The building was the new home of Kompaniya Singer, the Russian subsidiary of the famous American sewing machine firm. Atop the impressive building and towering over St. Petersburg's other commercial structures, two statues held aloft a globe of the world encircled by a band reading "Singer." Visible to all in the imperial capital, the Singer Manufacturing Company's name emblazoned around the world proclaimed the company's multinational perspective and global ambitions. Singer, one of the first American multinational enterprises, planned to surround the planet with its sewing machine empire. The impressive Nevsky Prospect building spoke to the importance of Kompaniya Singer and the Russian market within the Singer Manufacturing Company's global enterprise.

The upheaval of the early twentieth century, however, changed both Kompaniya Singer and the House of Singer. During the First World War, Singer's retail shops in the war zone were unable to function. On the home front, Kompaniya Singer's international connections drew suspicion from governmental and business officials. When revolutions rocked the Russian government in 1917, Kompaniya Singer and its employees faced the specter of nationalization and the uncertainties of the future. By the 1920s, the globe above Nevsky Prospect no longer marked the House of Singer. The building, commandeered by the Soviet officials, had become (and remains still) a bookstore.<sup>2</sup>

As the story of its former headquarters suggests, Kompaniya Singer found itself increasingly at odds with a society that was growing more nationalistic and less friendly to

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<sup>1</sup> Olga Matich, "28 Nevsky Prospect: The Sewing Machine, the Seamstress, and Narrative," in *"Petersburg"/Petersburg: Novel and City, 1900-1921* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 239.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

global enterprises. Singer's multinational identity increasingly became a source of strife for Kompaniya Singer and its employees. Singer's goals, like its Nevsky Prospect building were unabashedly multinational. The company sought to expand its retail empire and to sell as many sewing machines as possible. To this end, the American parent company and its Russian subsidiary recruited and accepted employees from many diverse backgrounds. In the Russian Empire, Kompaniya Singer employed local workers, foreign executives, and many members of ethnic minority groups.<sup>3</sup> The company's employees were as multinational as Singer, and both company and employees had to navigate the waters of increasing nationalism and rising bolshevism. In doing so, the company and many of its employees used Singer's connections and networks for help.

Association with Singer's supranational network opened doors and lines of communication for employees in need. During the Russian Civil War, these needs could be great, and Singer's assistance became an important asset for many of Kompaniya Singer's executive and managerial employees. Identification with Singer's supranational network provided benefits that were not always readily available via other associations. At times, this institutional identification with Singer competed with other more traditionally discussed identities, such as nationality, class, and religion. In some instances, identification with and connection to Singer was more valuable and expedient to Kompaniya Singer employees than was any other identity. In the chapters that follow, this thesis addresses the ways in which Kompaniya Singer and its employees built, used, fostered, and hampered these national and institutional identities during the chaotic period from 1914 to 1930. As it became impossible for Kompaniya Singer and its cosmopolitan employees to adapt to the nationalist and Marxist

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<sup>3</sup> Fred V. Carstensen, *American Enterprise in Foreign Markets: Studies of Singer and International Harvester in Imperial Russia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 71-72, 80-82.

changes of the early twentieth century, they relied on each other for stability and aid. This mutual reliance amid adversity adds a new dimension to corporation-employee relationships.

### **Sources and a Small Group of Singer Employees**

While it may be relatively simple to discuss the actions and policies of a corporation, like Kompaniya Singer, it is far more complicated to unravel the actions and motivations of its employees. In 1914, Kompaniya Singer employed over 30,000 men and women throughout the Russian Empire.<sup>4</sup> These employees came from across social classes and ethnic groups. To trace the actions and movements of all employees throughout the upheaval of the early twentieth century would be an impossible task.

Within the archival record, however, a small group of Kompaniya Singer's employees stands out in vivid relief. Between 1921 and 1930, thirty-seven men and one woman gave Singer formal affidavits of their experiences in Russia, resulting in a total of forty-six affidavits.<sup>5</sup> These affidavit writers had left Russia following the revolutions, and all but two of them were Kompaniya Singer employees. In their testimonies, they relate the demise of their former employer, as well as their personal experiences in imperial and Soviet Russia. Singer collected these affidavits in several European capitals as evidence of their corporate losses in Russia. Seeking restitution, Singer submitted the affidavits to the United States Department of State in the 1930s and again to the Federal Claims Settlement Commission in the 1950s. These records

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<sup>4</sup> Formation of the Staff, European Trip – Russia – 1915, box 155, folder 9, Singer Manufacturing Company Records, U.S. Mss AI, Wisconsin Historical Society, Library-Archives Division (hereafter cited as Singer Mss).

<sup>5</sup> Most of affidavits were given in 1921 or 1930. Eight affidavit subjects submitted two affidavits, one each in 1921 and 1930. An additional affidavit writer, Walter Dixon, gave affidavits in 1920 and 1921. See Affidavit of W.F. Dixon, July 24, 1920, 461.11 Si 6, *Records of the Department of State Relating to U.S. Claims Against Russia, 1910-1929* (National Archives Microfilm Publication T640, roll 8), General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59 (RG 59), National Archives at College Park, MD (NACP) and Affidavit of Walter F. Dixon, February 25, 1921, 461.11 Si 6, *Records of the Department of State Relating to U.S. Claims Against Russia, 1910-1929* (National Archives Microfilm Publication T640, roll 8), RG 59, NACP. Voldemar Ernst's affidavit was recorded in 1923, see Affidavit of Voldemar Wilhelm Ernst, July 5, 1923, *Records of the Department of State Relating to U.S. Claims Against Russia, 1910-1929* (National Archives Microfilm Publication T640, roll 8), RG 59, NACP.

remain in Singer's corporate archives at the Wisconsin Historical Society and in the State Department files at the U.S. National Archives.

These affidavits, combined with the correspondence and supplemental records held by both the Wisconsin Historical Society and the National Archives, drive the questions asked by this thesis. Who were the employees that gave affidavits to Singer? How did this cosmopolitan and managerial population experience Russia's First World War and Revolution? Finally, how did these employees interact with and understand their relationship to their multinational employer?

The small number of employees represented in these affidavits is not a representative sample of Singer's workforce. There is not a single affidavit given by one of Singer's unskilled Podolsk factory workers. Executives, managers, and ethnically German employees are overrepresented in both the affidavits and the letters. The Singer Manufacturing Company archival records even include a few letters written in German. Some of the reasons for this overrepresentation will be addressed in the chapters that follow, but it is important to note here that the findings of this thesis are not intended to speak to the entirety of Singer's labor force. Any patterns discussed must be limited to this small population, whom Singer executives could still contact for affidavits years after Singer produced its last sewing machine in Russia. The story of each individual employee, even within this group, is riddled with different concerns and opportunities. Where patterns exist within the letters and affidavits, however, I argue that these are significant indicators of a corporate culture or subculture. The absence of factory employees from the affidavits, for instance, may not be simply an oversight by the Singer leadership, but a hint to the cultural and class differences between Kompaniya Singer's leadership and its Podolsk workers. While it may be impossible to assess the breadth of Kompaniya Singer's post-

revolution network, the testimonies of the company's employees speak to the varying depths and utility of identifying or aligning with Singer and its resources.

### **Telling Singer's Story**

Many historians have discussed the impact of the Singer Manufacturing Company on international business, but the experiences of the company's employees have received less attention.<sup>6</sup> Historians investigating the Singer Manufacturing Company have historically approached the subject from a corporate or economic vantage point. Because Russia held an important place among Singer's foreign markets, it draws substantial attention in such accounts.<sup>7</sup> Kompaniya Singer's growth and success are fittingly held up as examples of the Singer Manufacturing Company's multinational scope and ambitions. The premier history of Singer's international expansion, Robert Bruce Davies' *Peacefully Working to Conquer the World: Singer Sewing Machines in Foreign Markets, 1854-1920*, details Kompaniya Singer's expansion and demise from this business perspective. While Davies discusses Kompaniya Singer's challenges, he considers the struggles of Singer's employees only as pieces in the company's successes and failures.<sup>8</sup> Like Davies, historian Fred V. Carstensen discussed Kompaniya Singer within the context of business expansion. In his comprehensive comparative analysis of Singer's and International Harvester's Russian operations before the First World War, Carstensen sheds light on the ethnic makeup and structure of Singer's managerial staff. Carstensen's goal is to explain

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<sup>6</sup> An exception within the Russian context is Kompaniya Singer's factory manager, Walter Dixon, who features prominently in two articles by Mona Domosh. See Mona Domosh, "American Capitalist Experiments in Revolutionary-Era Russia," *Journal of Historical Geography* 39 (2013): 43-53, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2012.04.004> and Mona Domosh, "Labor Geographies in a Time of Early Globalization: Strikes against Singer in Scotland and Russia in the Early 20th Century," *Geoforum* 39 (2008): 1676-1686, doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2008.04.004.

<sup>7</sup> For a general corporate history of the Singer Manufacturing Company that references Kompaniya Singer, see Don Bissell, *The First Conglomerate: 145 Years of the Singer Sewing Machine Company* (Brunswick, ME: Audenreed Press, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Robert Bruce Davies, *Peacefully Working to Conquer the World: Singer Sewing Machines in Foreign Markets, 1854-1920* (New York: Arno Press, 1976), 243-333.

Singer's administrative efficiency, however, and he addresses Singer's employees primarily as agents of Singer, rather than as self-motivated actors.<sup>9</sup>

Although histories like Davies' and Carstensen's do not highlight many of the affidavit writers that are fundamental to this thesis, these books introduce in detail the historical foundations of Kompaniya Singer in the late nineteenth century. They discuss Singer's early forays into the Russian Empire, Kompaniya Singer's 1897 incorporation as a Russian company, and its early 19<sup>th</sup> century expansion across the empire. This expansion was made manifest in a factory in the town of Podolsk (near Moscow), sales offices across the empire, and, of course, the imposing Nevsky Prospect headquarters. The Podolsk factory, which Kompaniya Singer began constructing in 1900 and opened in 1902, employed over 5,000 workers by 1914.<sup>10</sup> It was the only sewing machine factory in the Russian Empire.<sup>11</sup> Kompaniya Singer's sales network likewise thrived. The company covered the empire with fifty central agencies, each responsible for several smaller depots, by the outbreak of World War I.<sup>12</sup> Sales ballooned from 68,788 in 1895 to over 650,000 in 1914.<sup>13</sup> Carstensen estimates that Singer controlled up to 90 percent of the Russian sewing machine market.<sup>14</sup> Russia was the Singer Manufacturing Company's largest foreign market by 1914.<sup>15</sup>

Despite its success, Kompaniya Singer remained a foreign presence within the Empire, and this foreign and multinational character is essential to understanding its employees' experiences. The company had roots in America and deferred to the Singer Manufacturing

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<sup>9</sup> Fred V. Carstensen, *American Enterprise in Foreign Markets: Studies of Singer and International Harvester in Imperial Russia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 97.

<sup>10</sup> Protocol of the Commission of the All-Russian Zemstvo and Town Associations, 153-55, box 155, folder 1, Singer Mss.

<sup>11</sup> Formation of the Company and Organization of the Business, European Trip Documents – Russia – 1915, box 155, folder 9, 22, Singer Mss.

<sup>12</sup> Carstensen, *American Enterprise in Foreign Markets*, 62.

<sup>13</sup> Carstensen, *American Enterprise in Foreign Markets*, 56.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

Company headquarters in New York. This deference made Kompaniya Singer and, indeed, all of Singer's foreign offices, fundamentally different from its American market. Kompaniya Singer was inherently and overtly multinational. Unlike Singer's American employees, Kompaniya Singer workers were part of a foreign enterprise with foreign obligations and loyalties.

The position of Kompaniya Singer and its employees in a foreign environment has been the focus of geographer Mona Domosh and it plays an important role in the framing of this thesis. Domosh rejects the notion that American economic dominance in Russia and elsewhere was preordained. She stresses the actions of corporate executives and employees as the creators of Singer and other multinational corporations.<sup>16</sup> In several recent articles, Domosh positions Kompaniya Singer within the context of larger trends of early globalization and expansionary capitalism. Among these trends, Domosh devotes considerable attention to the concept of "embeddedness," by which she means the "relationships between economic actors...and noneconomic actors" within a particular social network and territorial context.<sup>17</sup> Domosh uses this concept to complicate the narrative of American economic globalization. While she discusses the grounding of Singer's employees, particularly its management, within Russia society, Domosh does not deal explicitly with questions of institutional identity, that is, how the employees related to Singer and its multinational orientation. This thesis probes these questions of the voluntary and symbiotic ties between Singer and its employees, as well as the limitations of such ties.

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<sup>16</sup> Mona Domosh, "The World Was Never Flat: Early Global Encounters and the Messiness of Empire," *Progress in Human Geography* 34, no. 4 (2010): 419.

<sup>17</sup> Mona Domosh, "Uncovering the Friction of Globalization: American Commercial Embeddedness and Landscape in Revolutionary-Era Russia," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 100, no. 2 (2010):429. doi: 10.1080/00045601003638733.

The ways in which Kompaniya Singer and its employees related to and called upon the multinational Singer network changed and expanded with the turmoil of the First World War and Russian Revolution, yet employees' experiences have garnered only minor attention in histories of Kompaniya Singer's demise. Earlier studies, like Davies' and Carstensen's books, have focused on the business and economic consequences of Kompaniya Singer's nationalization. Davies touches on Kompaniya Singer's demise, but the most thorough discussions of the nationalization of American firms are doctoral dissertations written by Floyd James Fithian and Thomas J. O'Neill.<sup>18</sup> O'Neill and Fithian use the claims submitted by American corporations to the Federal Claims Settlement Commission to reconstruct the corporate losses that Singer and other American companies sustained under the Soviet authorities. While O'Neill only touches on Singer's case, Fithian details much of Singer's loss.<sup>19</sup> Much as Davies and Carstensen elucidated the business practices and situations that led to Singer's success in Russia, O'Neill and Fithian explain the political and business realities that led to Kompaniya Singer's demise. Within these narratives, however, Singer's individual employees rarely appear, and the stories of the employees' personal navigation of the post-revolution era remain to be told.

The telling of these employee stories is a primary focus of this thesis. In the chapters that follow, this thesis examines the ways in which Kompaniya Singer and its employees mobilized identities, including identification with Singer. By embracing different identities, Singer's employees were given access to different communication and assistance networks. The mobilization of these identities provides insight into the perceived utility of different networks during this chaotic era. Although the early twentieth century is often spoken of as a high-water

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<sup>18</sup> Davies, *Peacefully Working to Conquer the World*, 306-333; Floyd James Fithian, "Soviet-American Economic Relations, 1918-1933: American Business in Russia during the Period of Nonrecognition," Ph.D. diss., University of Nebraska, 1964; Thomas J. O'Neill, "Business, Investment and Revolution in Russia: Case Studies of American Companies, 1880s-1920s," Ph.D. thesis, McGill University, 1987.

<sup>19</sup> Fithian, "Soviet-American Economic Relations," 14-20, 36-38.



point for nationalist sentiments, and the Bolshevik Revolution highlighted the significance of class consciousness, the affidavit writers found value in identifying with Singer in addition to or instead of these other identities. Singer's multinational nature fostered a form of cosmopolitanism among its employees.

### **Broadening the Discussion**

In order to consider the choices made and identities embraced by Kompaniya Singer's affidavit writing employees, it is necessary to reach beyond the bounds of economic and business history. Singer's employees were not just surrogates for their employer; they were actors in their own right. They made choices and ascribed loyalties based on their own best interests, not necessarily Singer's. The experiences and actions of Singer's affidavit writers can best be understood within the broader discussions surrounding national identity, the emergence of a cosmopolitan and transnational capitalist class, and the mobility regimes of the interwar period.

The embrace and assignment of identities, particularly national and institutional identities, is a significant aspect of understanding Singer's affidavit writers. Within the wide literature on nationalism, there has been much discussion of the creation and adoption of identities. Benedict Anderson introduced to this discussion the idea of the "imagined community." To Anderson, a nation was constructed by its members as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."<sup>20</sup> As an imagined group, Anderson's nation is more flexible than nations are often thought to be. This nation can reach beyond the immediate realities of politics or communication networks. Despite this flexibility, Anderson implicitly argues that the embeddedness of individuals in a time, place, and culture leads to identification with a particular nationality. Tara Zahra, on the other hand, suggests that

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<sup>20</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 6.

many actors are between national identities. Drawing her examples primarily from the nationally diverse borderlands of Central and Eastern Europe, Zahra argues that many people are not interested in national projects or shift national identity depending on time, place, and other concerns.<sup>21</sup> Zahra labels these nationally fluid or disinterested actors as “nationally indifferent” and argues that they constitute a large segment of many societies. Zahra contends that, contrary to previous assumptions, historians should start from the proposition that many, if not most, people did not see themselves as part of national projects.<sup>22</sup> Although these authors differ in the primacy they give to national identity, all posit identities that are constructed and therefore malleable. This fluidity of identity, in national and other forms, is fundamental to the opportunistic and pragmatic ways in which Singer’s affidavit writers relate to the company, the government, and the nation.

The identities that Singer’s employees mobilized from 1914 to 1930 were not exclusively national, but also encompassed a variety of institutional and transnational groups. Corporate identity and loyalty, particularly the significance and motivations of loyal corporate employees, which I refer to as “company men,” have been considered by many authors.<sup>23</sup> Within these studies, an institutional identity with an employer is often a source of fiscal security, but also a means of stifling individualism. Many of these discussions of company men are grounded within particular times and spaces.<sup>24</sup> This study of Kompaniya Singer adds another specific case study to this expanding literature.

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<sup>21</sup> Tara Zahra, “Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis,” *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (2010): 102-103.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>23</sup> For instance, see William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956); Clark Davis, *Company Men: White-Collar Life and Corporate Cultures in Los Angeles, 1892-1941* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000); Anthony Sampson, *Company Man: The Rise and Fall of Corporate Life* (London: HarperCollins, 1995); and Donna M. Randall, “Commitment and the Organization: The Organization Man Revisited,” *Academy of Management Review* 12, no. 3 (1987): 460-471.

<sup>24</sup> See Whyte, *Organization Man*; and Davis, *Company Men*.

Singer's company men are set apart, however, by the transnational nature of their employer. This thesis, therefore, also seeks to place Singer's employees within the discussion of transnational networks and community building. Drawing upon Benedict Anderson as well as several other theorists, Marie-Laure Djelic and Sigrud Quack have introduced what they call "transnational communities." These communities, the authors argue, share five essential traits: (i) community identity is one of many claimed by the individual, i.e. it does not replace local identities; (ii) active community members are engaged and embedded in both the local and transnational communities, becoming what the authors call "rooted cosmopolitans;" (iii) transnational communities are imagined and therefore fluid; (iv) transnational communities allow for a "fair amount of within-community diversity;" and (v) the communities are often short-lived or fleeting associations.<sup>25</sup> In some ways, Singer's multinational network facilitated and sustained such a transnational community for its employees. As a business, Singer had objectives other than such community building, yet against the backdrop of state and societal upheaval in Russia, Singer's multinational character gave it a stability that helped to maintain a useful network for its affidavit writers. The extent and value of Kompaniya Singer as a community and network is therefore an important component of this thesis.

In addition to Singer's multinational practices, Kompaniya Singer's employees were motivated by their own cosmopolitan and transnational experiences. Some authors have discussed transnational migrations that followed the Russian Revolution as one of the first examples of a modern cosmopolitanism, but Singer's employees exhibit an even earlier

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<sup>25</sup> Marie-Laure Djelic and Sigrud Quack, "Transnational Communities and Governance," in *Transnational Communities: Shaping Global Economic Governance*, ed. Marie-Laure Djelic and Sigrud Quack (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 25-28.

cosmopolitanism.<sup>26</sup> In discussing this distinctively modern and corporate cosmopolitanism, this thesis builds upon and incorporates later discussions of twentieth and twenty-first century transnational business classes and the rise of a global elite.<sup>27</sup> While authors discussing the twenty-first century trends of globalization purport to address an emerging phenomenon, I argue that Singer and its employees employed similar national indifference and supranational loyalties a century earlier.

This argument derives, in part, from a variation on assertions made by Yuri Slezkine in his book, *The Jewish Century*. Slezkine argues that the European Jews of the nineteenth and twentieth century were one example of a culture of mobile service providers that he calls “Mercurians.” One of the ties that held the Jews together as a national group was the “corporate kinship” of their work. Not bound to the land, the national bonds of “Mercurians” differ from those of their farming neighbors.<sup>28</sup> Slezkine’s “Mercurians” are united by their professional networks, which reinforce and enhance national connections. Using Slezkine’s idea of “Mercurian” cultures, Benjamin Sawyer suggests that, in late Imperial Russia, the German-speaking elite may have filled these roles.<sup>29</sup> Singer’s multinational character built upon and fostered “Mercurian” identities and corporate loyalty among its employees, many of whom were part of the Imperial Russian German-speaking elite.

Discussions of “Mercurians” and cosmopolitans are necessarily tied to understandings of mobility and migration. Individual mobility and migration within Russia, as well as emigration

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<sup>26</sup> See Rebecka Lettevall, “Cosmopolitanism in Practice: Perspectives on the Nansen Passports,” in *East European Diasporas, Migration and Cosmopolitanism*, ed. Ulrike Ziemer and Sean P. Roberts (London: Routledge, 2013), 13-24.

<sup>27</sup> For discussions of a global elite as a late twentieth and early twenty-first century concept, see Bruce Mazlish and Elliott R. Morss, “A Global Elite?” in *Leviathans: Multinational Corporations and the New Global History*, ed. Alfred D. Chandler and Bruce Mazlish (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 45-79 and Leslie Sklair, *The Transnational Capitalist Class* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001).

<sup>28</sup> Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 24-25.

<sup>29</sup> Benjamin Sawyer, “Manufacturing Germans: Singer Manufacturing Company and American Capitalism in the Russian Imagination during World War I,” *Enterprise & Society* 17, no. 2 (2016): 20, doi: 10.1017/eso.2015.71.

from Russia, in the late tsarist and early Soviet periods have become significant topics of study in recent years. This thesis enters into these discussions by highlighting a less discussed dimension of this mobility. While discussions of mobility often draw divisions between displaced persons and voluntary cosmopolitans, the experiences of Singer's affidavit writers speak to the convergence and overlap of these two groups.

### **Organization of the Thesis**

In assessing identities of Singer and its employees, this thesis follows a roughly chronological progression. The first chapter addresses Kompaniya Singer's conception of nationality during the First World War (1914-1917). Set against the Imperial Russian government's investigations of Kompaniya Singer's German connections, this chapter considers the efforts of Kompaniya Singer's leaders to assert a Russian identity for themselves and their company. In doing so, the chapter addresses the effect of Russian economic nationalism on the multinational identities of Singer and its employees. This chapter explores the limitations of Kompaniya Singer's attempt to embrace Russianness, especially in consideration of its perceived and real relationships with the Russian, American, and British states. Special attention is paid to the role of German and Russian ethnic identities within Singer's self-conception.

The second chapter focuses on relationship between Kompaniya Singer and the affidavit writers during the Russian Revolution and Civil War. Tracing the piecemeal disintegration of Singer's Russian business, this chapter highlights the different ways in which Kompaniya Singer employees experienced revolutionary Russia and how these experiences influenced their relationship to Singer. Drawing on discussions of corporate loyalty and corporate identity, this chapter considers what it meant to be a Kompaniya Singer "company man" during the revolution. In contrast to mid-twentieth century ideas of corporate identification, I argue that

Kompaniya Singer's company men mobilized their relationship with Kompaniya Singer to serve their own best interests.

The third chapter considers the legacy and networks of Kompaniya Singer in the period from 1919 to 1930. While the timeline of this chapter overlaps with the previous section, this chapter focuses on Kompaniya Singer's employees once they left Russia. Complementing the previous chapter, this chapter discusses the ways in which Singer mobilized its displaced employees within and outside Russia to create a "company in exile." Drawing on discussions of the Russian emigrant communities of the interwar period (known as Russia Abroad), this chapter discusses the pragmatic ways in which Singer Manufacturing Company executives attempted to maintain the networks of their Russian company in the hope of reentering the Russian market. Once these hopes began to appear futile, Singer executives and employees began to reassess and adapt their relationship with one another. Building on the previous chapter, this chapter confirms the symbiotic relationship of complementary goals that existed between Singer and the affidavit writers.

Throughout these chapters, this thesis probes the extent and variety of national, institutional, and multinational identities within the largest foreign market of one of the world's first multinational corporations. Kompaniya Singer and its employees mobilized a variety of identities and networks to their own benefit. The multinational character of the Singer Manufacturing Company and the cosmopolitanism of its employees facilitated this national and institutional fluidity, but, as became especially obvious during World War I and the Russian Revolution, they also limited the options for adaptation. With limited options, Kompaniya Singer's affidavit writers looked to their employer as a source of stability and aid. Singer, on its part, turned to these same employees as trustworthy sources of information and dependability.

Through the story of the symbiotic relationship between Kompaniya Singer and its employees, this thesis adds new dimensions to the concept of a corporate company man. Singer, a vast multinational enterprise, grew to rely on its Russian company men as individuals, not as interchangeable employees. These cosmopolitan company men, in turn, sought out the aid that only a transnational organization like Singer could supply. Company and employees became willing allies and powerful partners.

## Chapter 2

### Kompaniya Singer and Russianness during World War I

In the summer of 1915, the Imperial Russian government closed over 500 shops belonging to Kompaniya Singer, the Russian subsidiary of the Singer Manufacturing Company. Singer was the largest supplier and only manufacturer of sewing machines within the Russian Empire.<sup>30</sup> The sewing machine company had been present in the Russian market since the 1860s, but it became a target of suspicion in the rising nationalism of the First World War. Singer, which had originally come to the Russian Empire through the company's German office, was accused of being under the control of enemy aliens and functioning as a front for German spies. While these accusations were false, it would take Singer executives in New York and Moscow over a year to free Singer from Russian government oversight and interference.

There is no simple explanation as to why it took one of the world's largest and most powerful companies so long to free itself from the interference of an increasingly ineffective state. Basic considerations arising from the difficulty of managing a transoceanic business during wartime were certainly factors. The long tradition of ethnically German leadership in Kompaniya Singer would not have helped Singer's appearance of Russian loyalty. Despite these hardships, Singer actively tried to restore its Russian company's good name. Singer's actions to free itself from government suspicion, however, have largely been overlooked by historians.

Rather, historians looking at Kompaniya Singer's sequestration have focused on the imperial government's missteps and misunderstandings of Singer. Benjamin Sawyer attributed Singer's difficulties to the government's suspicion of its modern information gathering practices, arguing that Singer's foreign business practices were misunderstood in Russia's less-developed

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<sup>30</sup> Formation of the Company and Organization of the Business, European Trip Documents – Russia – 1915, 22, box 155, folder 9, Singer Mss.



economic sector. This foreignness was wrongly equated with Germanness.<sup>31</sup> Eric Lohr and William C. Fuller Jr. mention Singer's predicament as part of their larger narratives on the overreach of Russian military suspicion and nationalization policies. While Singer was not the only foreign company targeted by governmental and military powers, the size of Kompaniya Singer's business and the strength of the international Singer Manufacturing Company made its sequestration a prime example of the overreach of Russian military and governmental nationalization policies.<sup>32</sup> Using Singer as an example, these historians have been among those to argue that the Russian government increasingly turned against ethnic minorities during the First World War. These narratives shed light on the Russian government's increasing protectionism and nationalism, but they fail to grapple with the actions of Kompaniya Singer and its employees. How did Singer respond to wartime nationalism, and how did its employees frame the national identity of their company?

Sources from the Singer Manufacturing Company's own records suggest that Singer and its employees actively sought to defend their company and themselves by presenting Kompaniya Singer as a distinctively Russian company. While Singer remained fundamentally multinational, its leaders strove to present their Russian subsidiary as loyally and patriotically Russian. Despite this effort, Singer's self-conception and self-presentation of its Russianness were not always in accord with rising ethnic Russian nationalism. The story of Singer's sequestration is at its core a clash between the emerging realities of nationalism and multinational industry. As one of the first multinational companies, Singer was one of the first to navigate the waters between patriotic duty and multinational commerce. Singer was fundamentally transnational and incapable of

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<sup>31</sup> Sawyer, "Manufacturing Germans," 303-304.

<sup>32</sup> Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign against Enemy Aliens during World War I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 79-82; William C. Fuller, Jr., *The Foe Within: Fantasies of Treason and the End of Imperial Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 166.

adopting the ethnically Russian (*ruskii*) identity increasingly valued by the imperial Russian government and business elite. Instead, Singer attempted to project a non-ethnic Russian (*rossiiskii*) identity.

Between 1915 and early 1917, Singer Manufacturing Company and Kompaniya Singer employees worked through a variety of governmental and private avenues to combat their company's sequestration and assert its *rossiiskii* Russianness. In a time when even Russian-born minorities were viewed warily, however, to what extent could Singer succeed? Singer's actions and reactions, successes and repeated failures reveal how Singer's multinational identity and nationally indifferent business practices prevented the company from easily or completely exonerating itself in the face of government accusations.

### **Russian Singer before the War**

When Singer entered Russia in the mid-nineteenth century, the country was openly soliciting foreign industry and settlement. The first 355 Singer sewing machines entered the Russian market between 1859 and 1861 through Singer's agent in France, Charles Callebout.<sup>33</sup> Although Russia does not seem to have been a priority for Callebout, it soon became one for the New York-based Singer leadership. During the domestic turmoil of the American Civil War, Singer turned to overseas markets to shore up its bottom line.<sup>34</sup> Russia, which boasted a large population and no native sewing machine manufactures, was one such market. The company entered Russia in earnest by contracting with a St. Petersburg merchant to sell its machines. Under this merchant, Max Fiedler, Singer slowly expanded throughout the empire.<sup>35</sup>

As the Singer Manufacturing Company expanded worldwide, it began to consolidate its sales under direct, rather than contracted, control. In that vein, George Neidlinger, Singer's

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<sup>33</sup> Davies, *Peacefully Working to Conquer the World*, 243.

<sup>34</sup> Carstensen, *American Enterprise in Foreign Markets*, 28.

<sup>35</sup> Davies, *Peacefully Working to Conquer the World*, 243-244.

general agent in Hamburg, took formal control of the Russian business in 1877.<sup>36</sup> Under Neidlinger's leadership, Singer's Russian business greatly expanded. In under twenty years, Neidlinger oversaw the creation of a vast Singer network across Russia. This network included four central offices and over seventy-five retail stores reaching from Ukraine to Siberia.<sup>37</sup> In 1895 alone, Neidlinger's Russian Singer sold 68,788 sewing machines.<sup>38</sup> Singer, a foreign company, had become a significant force within the Russian sewing machine market. In 1897, Singer's Russian business was incorporated as a Russian company under Russian law. It was named Kompaniya Singer.<sup>39</sup>

Although Singer's nineteenth-century success in the imperial Russian market owes much to the innovation and work of Fiedler, Neidlinger, and Singer's other employees, it would not have been possible without the Russian government's openness to foreign investment and immigration. These early sales occurred amidst Russia's nineteenth-century openness to foreign immigrants and investments. The Great Reforms of the 1860s had opened Russian society to new levels of internal mobility and openness to foreign immigration. Eric Lohr describes Russia's pre-World War I immigration and citizenship policies as an "attract and hold" model.<sup>40</sup> The Imperial Government realized that it had a vast country to settle and it solicited and welcomed foreigners to become Russian subjects. These immigrants were incorporated into an empire that, Lohr contends, embraced an assimilationist approach to Russian subjecthood.<sup>41</sup> They could become Russian.

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<sup>36</sup> Carstensen, *American Enterprise in Foreign*, 30-31.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Protocol of the Commission of the All-Russian Zemstvo and Town Associations, box 155, folder 1, Singer Mss.

<sup>40</sup> Eric Lohr, *Russian Citizenship: From Empire to Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 5. ProQuest ebrary.

<sup>41</sup> Lohr, *Russian Citizenship*, 7.

There were, of course, exceptions to this mobility and assimilation. Russian-subject Jews were still infamously restricted to the Pale of Settlement, and foreign Jews were also prohibited from settling in most parts of the empire.<sup>42</sup> Ethnic Polish and Ukrainian regions were targeted with what could be seen as Russification programs.<sup>43</sup> Even foreign Orthodox clergy members were only admitted to the country in small numbers.<sup>44</sup> The immigrants that Russia sought and solicited were white westerners capable of bringing an economic boost to the country. Given these ethnic and religious litmus tests to immigration, how ethnically and nationally indifferent was the Russian Empire of the late nineteenth century?

Certainly, the imperial government did not ignore ethnicity, but neither did it envision itself as a nation-state. While Theodore R. Weeks identified Russian nationalism within the empire, especially on the Western borders, from the mid-nineteenth century, he argues that the imperial Russian government's nationality policies were primarily reactionary. While acknowledging that at times "the desire to equate Russia with the Great Russian nationality and the Orthodox church was irresistible," Weeks concludes that the empire was essentially non-national.<sup>45</sup> The Russian state, driven as it was by the desire to populate its land and build the economy of its diverse empire, was acting out of pragmatism more than nationalism. Although not all nations or ethnic groups were treated equally, nineteenth century Russia was far from a nation-state.

To Western European businesses and businessmen, like Singer's Neidlinger, the Russian Empire was welcoming and accommodating. As part of the Great Reforms, Russia allowed

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>43</sup> Theodore R. Weeks, *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia: Nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863-1914* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008), 13. Weeks makes the argument that, seen from the government's perspective, these policies may not have been driven by russification. These policies can also be seen as logical actions taken to defend the Russian Empire from internal division.

<sup>44</sup> Lohr, *Russian Citizenship*, 45.

<sup>45</sup> Weeks, *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia*, 5.

foreign investors and businessmen to enjoy many of the rights of Russian subjects regardless of whether they changed their state allegiances. Prior to the 1860s, foreigners would have received substantial gains by seeking Russian subjecthood. After the Reforms, however, foreigners could join professional guilds, make long-term investments, and even will their assets to their descendants.<sup>46</sup> Singer executives and employees were able to run Singer's Russian business without being or becoming Russian, and many retained their foreign citizenship. Neidlinger oversaw both German and Russian sales from his German office until 1902, and he remained a German subject.<sup>47</sup> In this he was not alone.

Starting in 1902, *Kompaniya Singer* was administered from within Russia, yet its leadership remained foreign. Albert Flohr, a member of *Kompaniya Singer*'s board of directors and a German subject, served as sales director from 1902 until 1915.<sup>48</sup> Walter F. Dixon, an American citizen and another of the *Kompaniya Singer* board of directors, managed the building and operation of Singer's Podolsk factory beginning in 1900.<sup>49</sup> Together, Flohr and Dixon oversaw over 30,000 workers in the Russian Empire at the start of World War I.<sup>50</sup> While Singer strove for local managers and employees, many of its Russian staff were foreign born or drawn from imperial ethnic minorities. On the sales side, these employees were spread throughout a vast network of fifty central sales offices across the empire. These central offices, each run by an agent, were generally located in urban areas. Each central office managed several smaller

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<sup>46</sup> Lohr, *Russian Citizenship*, 53-55.

<sup>47</sup> Protocol of the Commission of the All-Russian Zemstvo and Town Associations, 146, box 155, folder 1, Singer Mss.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 148; Carstensen, *American Enterprise in Foreign Markets*, 55.

<sup>49</sup> Domosh, "American Capitalist Experiments," 46.

<sup>50</sup> Formation of the Staff, European Trip – Russia – 1915, box 155, folder 9, Singer Mss.

offices, called depots.<sup>51</sup> At Podolsk, Dixon managed 5,614 factory staff and laborers in 1914. Most, but not all, of Dixon's employees were ethnically Russian.<sup>52</sup>

In 1914, Dixon and Flohr sat atop an expansive and ethnically diverse Kompaniya Singer network. While Singer's size was noteworthy, its multiethnic and foreign character was not unusual. One study found that only about a third of corporate managers in 1905 were ethnically Russian, while 10.5 percent were foreigners. These numbers include only businesses, like Kompaniya Singer, chartered within Russia. Inclusion of foreign enterprises, which generally employed foreign managers, would have increased this percentage.<sup>53</sup> Foreign and ethnic minority managers were common among Russian companies during the long nineteenth century, yet they decreased markedly by the first year of World War I. The same study found that only 5.7 percent of corporate managers in 1914 were foreigners.<sup>54</sup> Why had this percentage plummeted?

The general decrease may have had many causes, of course, but the outbreak of war exacerbated and heightened the effects. The "attract and hold" immigration policies of early days were quickly abandoned by the imperial government, and foreign allegiances became suspect.<sup>55</sup> The government did not just harden its stance toward foreigners, however. Eric Lohr has argued that, while the empire may have been ethnically assimilationist before World War I, the war provoked increasingly nationalistic sentiment in both the imperial government and the business sector.<sup>56</sup> Both the government and the business elite increasingly favored ethnically Russian industry and investment. According to Ruth AmEnde Roosa's detailed study, the

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<sup>51</sup> Carstensen, *American Enterprise in Foreign Markets*, 55, 69-70.

<sup>52</sup> Domosh, "American Capitalist Experiments," 46.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas C. Owen, *Russian Corporate Capitalism from Peter the Great to Perestroika* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 68, 72, 188.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>55</sup> Lohr, *Russian Citizenship*, 9.

<sup>56</sup> Eric Lohr, "Russian Economic Nationalism during the First World War: Moscow Merchants and Commercial Diasporas," *Nationalities Papers* 31, no. 4 (2003): 472. doi: 10.1080/0090599032000152924.

Petrograd-based Association of Industry and Trade was initially accepting of foreign involvement and foreign industrial growth within Russia. Thomas Owen and Eric Lohr's analyses of the Moscow merchant organizations conclude that these Russian industrialists were increasingly and overtly nationalistic. Despite these differences between the groups, all three authors conclude that the start of World War I increased the influence of ethnically Russian, *russkii* nationalism within Russian industry.<sup>57</sup> The War facilitated the imperial government's embrace of the ethnic Russian identity increasingly propagated by Moscow's growing Russian business class.<sup>58</sup> Before the war, in other words, governmental Russianness had been a *rossiiskii* construct while the wartime climate favored a more ethnically dependent *russkii* identity.

Kompaniya Singer's wartime interactions with representatives of the government reveal the extent to which Singer's conception of Russianness diverged from the government's emerging ideal of ethnically Russian nationalism. To the imperial government, non-Russian nationality implied non-Russian loyalties. Singer attempted to conform to the government's expectations of Russianness, but its multinational character made this adjustment impossible to execute fully. Rather, Singer's leaders attempted to adapt to the growing nationalist sentiment by crafting a Russian national identity that retained the *rossiiskii* national indifference of the earlier period, while integrating the patriotism of the war era.

### **War and Kompaniya Singer's German Problem**

As the government came to equate Russian ethnicity with Russian nationalism, this equation brought with it the assumption that German ethnicity implied German nationalism and German patriotism. Kompaniya Singer's historical connections to Germany and ethnically

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<sup>57</sup> Ruth AmEnde Roosa, *Russian Industrialists in an Era of Revolution: The Association of Industry and Trade, 1906-1917* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 89-90; Thomas C. Owen, *Capitalism and Politics in Russia: A Social History of the Moscow Merchants, 1855-1905* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 210; Lohr, "Russian Economic Nationalism," 471.

<sup>58</sup> Lohr, "Russian Economic Nationalism," 472.

German leadership made both the company's stores and its employees targets of suspicion. Within a month of the declaration of war, the Russian Imperial Army and governmental leaders were planning for the deportation of Germans from the western borderlands to the interior of the empire.<sup>59</sup> The enemy aliens first targeted were men enrolled in enemy military reserves, but soon all able-bodied foreigners of military age residing in the empire were susceptible to deportation. As Lohr and other historians have noted, this deportation of civilians as prisoners of war was a break from previous wartime practices.<sup>60</sup> Foreign nationality became equated with loyalty to foreign states, and civilians were viewed as potential government agents.

Kompaniya Singer's interactions with the imperial government in the early stages of the war reveal the extent to which the government's understanding of loyalty to the empire became aligned with ethnic Russian identity, or at least against perceived enemy national identities. In this context, nationality began to complicate the skill and experience concerns that had guided Kompaniya Singer's staffing decisions. Individuals could no longer be seen simply as skilled workers; they were also increasingly labelled by nationality.

A small but significant number of the employees on Kompaniya Singer's payroll at the outbreak of war were German. By Kompaniya Singer's 1915 figures, at the start of the First World War the company employed 131 subjects of enemy nations. While a comparatively small portion of the company's more than 30,000 employees, many of these men occupied important positions.<sup>61</sup> Among the 13 subjects of enemy states working in the Moscow headquarters were Kompaniya Singer's chief bookkeeper, Willy Rutencratz; superintendent of organization, Kuno

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<sup>59</sup> Peter Gatrell, *Russia's First World War: A Social and Economic History* (Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2005), 179.

<sup>60</sup> Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire*, 122-123.

<sup>61</sup> Formation of the Staff, European Trip – Russia – 1915, box 155, folder 9, Singer Mss.



Ganzel; and manager of manufacturing, Karl Klein.<sup>62</sup> In addition, at least eight of Kompaniya Singer's central office agents were also German or Austrian subjects.<sup>63</sup> From a total of only fifty central offices, these eight agents constituted a significant portion of Kompaniya Singer's middle management. The presence of these German managers reflects what Singer historian Fred V. Carstensen called a "distinct pattern" of appointing German and western European employees to positions of responsibility within Kompaniya Singer.<sup>64</sup>

This dependence on German management was typical throughout the empire prior to World War I. Thomas Owen assessed that in 1914 over 20 percent of corporate managers in the Russian Empire were ethnic Germans, either German or Russian subjects.<sup>65</sup> This number is startling considering that, per the 1897 imperial census, only about 1.5 percent of the Russian population spoke German as a first language.<sup>66</sup> Germans and other employees from more industrialized nations had knowledge and skills that were lacking in the Russian workforce.<sup>67</sup> For Kompaniya Singer, which had originated through Neidlinger's German offices, there was a legacy of German connections further facilitating the recruitment of German and German-speaking employees. Before the War, Singer's outposts in Germany and Russia had routine communication and exchange. This nationally indifferent hiring and promotion of skilled workers, while not atypical in the prewar era, became a liability for Kompaniya Singer in 1914.

Singer executives in New York were aware of the practical and apparent problems inherent in Kompaniya Singer's German-speaking workforce. As early as October 8, 1914,

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.; Affidavits of Karl Klein, Willy Rutencrantz, Kuno Ganzel, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.

<sup>63</sup> Flohr to Alexander, Oct. 17, 1914, European Trip – Russia – 1914, box 155, folder 9, Singer Mss.

<sup>64</sup> Carstensen, *American Enterprise in Foreign Markets*, 60.

<sup>65</sup> Owen, *Russian Corporate Capitalism*, 72.

<sup>66</sup> The census recorded 1,790,489 native German speakers, out of a total population of 125,640,021. "Pervaya vseobshchaya perepis' Naceleniya Rossiiskoi' Imperii 1897 g.," *Demoskop Weekly*, [http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus\\_lan\\_97.php](http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus_lan_97.php). For further discussion of the German population as recorded in 1897, see Ingeborg Fleischhauer, "The Germans' Role in Tsarist Russia: A Reappraisal," in *The Soviet Germans: Past and Present*, by Ingeborg Fleischhauer and Benjamin Pinkus (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1986), 13-18.

<sup>67</sup> Carstensen, *American Enterprise in Foreign Markets*, 60.

Singer Manufacturing Company President Douglas Alexander asked Kompaniya Singer's Sales Director, Albert Flohr, about the situation of Kompaniya Singer's German employees.<sup>68</sup> Likely not understanding the extent of the Russian government's plans for relocation, Alexander wrote of his hope that three Moscow-based German employees had "not suffered too much inconvenience." Alexander's hopes notwithstanding, two of the employees named in his letter were deported by the Russian government to the interior provinces by October 17. The third was removed the middle of December. These employees were not the only Singer employees interned by the Russian government. Eight of the company's central office agents had also been deported by mid-October.<sup>69</sup> To the government, each foreigner within the country was a potential threat. As recorded by Singer President Douglas Alexander, Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Sazonov told Alexander and Dixon in a 1915 meeting that Singer's pre-war employment of, by his count, 125 German subjects meant that Singer had employed "125 spies or potential spies."<sup>70</sup> While the veracity of Alexander's narration is questionable, Singer's executives were clearly under the impression that the imperial government equated national identity with loyalty to a state. To continue their business in Russia, Singer attempted to meet the government's standard of Russianness. Singer fired its German subjects and even some of its ethnically German employees.<sup>71</sup>

As the imperial government continued to equate Germanness with disloyalty to the Russian Empire, its conception of Russianness became increasingly defined by ethnicity. As has been mentioned, German subjects and ethnic Germans were over represented in the late imperial elite. In the government's ethnically based understanding of Russianness, these individuals were

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<sup>68</sup> Alexander to Flohr, October 17, 1914, European Trip – Russia – 1914, box 155, folder 9, Singer Mss.

<sup>69</sup> Flohr to Alexander, October 17, 1914, European Trip – Russia – 1914, box 155, folder 9, Singer Mss; Alexander to Flohr, December 22, 1914, Micro 2013, Reel 54, Singer Mss.

<sup>70</sup> Russian Visit, Oct. 23-Nov. 17, 1915, European Trip – Russia – 1915, box 155, folder 9, Singer Mss.

<sup>71</sup> Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire*, 81-82.

no longer considered loyal subjects of the tsar. Rather, the allegiance of a large and influential population within the empire had been called into question. However, unlike the Poles or regional intelligentsias, who Theodore Weeks identifies as two of the chief targets of late nineteenth century Russian nationalism, ethnic Germans were deeply embedded in the imperial leadership.<sup>72</sup> Thus, the government suspicion of this once privileged group marked a dramatic change in the imperial understanding of Russianness. Singer attempted to respond to this ethnic Russification. The company fired its German-subject employees, and even some ethnically German subjects of the tsar. These actions were the limit of Singer's ability to embrace ethnic Russianness.

Especially problematic for Singer's Russian identity was Kompaniya Singer's sales director, Albert Flohr. Flohr oversaw Singer's vast sales organization, and this Germanness did not escape notice by the government. As deportations continued, Flohr's position in Moscow was increasingly tenuous in late 1914 and early 1915. At the same time that the first of Kompaniya Singer's German employees was sent to the interior provinces, Flohr appealed to the Russian government for a "concession" which would allow him to remain at his post in Moscow.<sup>73</sup> Having suffered a stroke in 1905 and never having fully recovered, Flohr would not have been considered a candidate for the German army.<sup>74</sup> Potential military mobilization was an important factor in the early deportations to the Russian interior, and Flohr's health excluded him from German military service. Noting his incapacitation, the Russian government granted Flohr an exemption from the deportation order. While this exemption seems to imply a pragmatism and national indifference in governmental actions, it was only a brief respite for Flohr. The

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<sup>72</sup> Weeks, *Nation and State*, 46; Anders Henriksson, "Nationalism, Assimilation and Identity in Late Imperial Russia: The St. Petersburg Germans, 1906-1914," *Russian Review* 52, no. 3 (1993): 346.

<sup>73</sup> Flohr to Alexander, October 17, 1914, European Trip – Russia – 1914, box 155, folder 9, Singer Mss.

<sup>74</sup> Protocol of the Commission of the All-Russian Zemstvo and Town Associations, box 155, folder 1, Singer Mss.

conflict between Flohr's nationality and the government's increasingly narrow definition of loyalty and Russianness became apparent only a few months later.

Flohr's Germanness was soon noted by newly introduced and nationally motivated government inspectors. This network of inspectors, which became a thorn in Kompaniya Singer's side, was instituted by the imperial government in March 1915. The government decreed that inspectors could be deployed to oversee the operations of companies formed under Russian law. This decree gave the government sweeping power to counter the economic activities of foreign subjects within the empire. It stated that:

the Minister of Finances appoints special Government Inspectors to supervise the operations of Stock Companies or Stock Societies formed under Russian Laws, in those cases when among the Stockholders or Management are subjects of the States at war with Russia or when there is ground for suspicion as to the real transfer of the stock or management into the hands of Russian subjects or the subjects of friendly or neutral nations, of Partnership associations, full or in trust, in the membership of which there are, or were prior to the war, enemy aliens and of Commercial-industrial undertakings belonging wholly to enemy aliens living in Russia.<sup>75</sup>

At the heart of this decree was the assumption that subjects of enemy nations posed a threat to the Russian Empire and that loyalties of these individuals opposed imperial Russian interests. Kompaniya Singer was a legally Russian company, yet the mandate of these inspectors treated Singer and Flohr as potential enemies of the Russian state.

The conflict between Flohr's citizenship and the new law was swiftly brought to the attention of Kompaniya Singer. In the same month that this decree was propagated, Alexander Gouriev, a state advisor, sent a notice to Kompaniya Singer's Petrograd representative expressing dismay that Flohr was still "managing the whole [Kompaniya Singer] enterprise." Gouriev informed the company that he was submitting a report to the imperial government in which Kompaniya Singer was used as an "example of evasions of the law and decisions by

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<sup>75</sup> Collection of Decrees and Orders of the Government, No. 107, April 8, 1915, box 155, folder 1, Singer Mss.

Germans, contrary to the objects and intentions of the Government.” While this letter was ostensibly sent to afford Singer the chance to correct any misinformation, the author also stressed the urgency of removing Flohr from the operations of Kompaniya Singer.<sup>76</sup> Flohr’s German birth had become a distinct problem for Singer. Regardless of his skill and experience in leading Kompaniya Singer’s sales operations, Flohr was now a clear liability. He could no longer effectively run Kompaniya Singer.

Singer would later claim that Flohr had resigned a month before Gouriev wrote to Singer’s offices.<sup>77</sup> Based on Flohr’s correspondence, however, it seems more likely that he remained in his position until at least the middle of March.<sup>78</sup> His removal likely came around the same time that the government instituted its policy of government inspectors. Singer understood that the government’s campaign against German nationals would not have allowed Flohr to remain in his position much longer. By removing Flohr, Singer removed a major obstacle to its relationship with the government and its Russian identity.

Flohr’s removal did not put an end to Singer’s problems, however. By this time, Singer had already been branded as a potentially disloyal, German corporation and the removal of one man, even a man in leadership, could not remove this stigma. On the contrary, Singer’s situation only worsened. Shortly after Flohr’s departure, a government inspector was appointed to oversee the operations of Kompaniya Singer.<sup>79</sup> Singer, it seems, was on the government’s watch list with or without Flohr.

Kompaniya Singer attracted the attention of not only government bureaucrats, but also military officials. On June 6, 1915, army officer Mikhail Bonch-Bruevich led searches of over

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<sup>76</sup> Gourieff to Kölpin, March 24, 1915, box 155, folder 1, Singer Mss.

<sup>77</sup> Protocol of the Commission of the All-Russian Zemstvo and Town Associations, box 155, folder 1, Singer Mss.

<sup>78</sup> Alexander to Flohr, March 18, 1915, Micro 2013, Reel 54, Singer Mss.

<sup>79</sup> “Protocol of the Commission of the All-Russian Zemstvo and Town Associations”; Collection of Decrees and Orders of the Government, box 155, folder 1, Singer Mss.

500 Singer branches in the Petrograd military district. Historian William C. Fuller, Jr. has called this search and the subsequent closure of Singer's offices "the most extreme example of Bruevich's inquisitorial zeal."<sup>80</sup> If this was an inquisition, its target was suspected German spies. The searches and closures of Singer stores near the imperial capital led to searches throughout the empire, from Kiev to Irkutsk.<sup>81</sup> The military, like the bureaucracy, had equated non-Russian ethnicities with foreign allegiances. Flohr's resignation and the internment of enemy aliens had not ended Singer's perceived Germanness.

In August 1915, Kompaniya Singer was brought before a commission formed from the All-Russia Zemstvo and Town Associations (Zemgor) to elucidate its national and patriotic loyalties. The Zemgor found Kompaniya Singer to be free from German loyalties, but the imperial government's Finance Ministry continued to require government inspectors to oversee Singer's Russian operations. These inspectors were not removed until the fall of the tsarist government in 1917.<sup>82</sup> Until that time, the governmental bureaucracy and the military continued to view Singer with suspicion.

Singer had attempted to adjust to the government's increasingly *russkii* nationalism by voluntarily removing German employees, but its multinational business model and perspective made it impossible for Singer to either understand or implement this ethnic nationalism fully. While not explicitly contradicting the governmental association of nationality with loyalty, Kompaniya Singer adopted additional self-defense strategies that suggested an understanding that loyalty to the empire was derived from choices and actions—legal constructs, cultural

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<sup>80</sup> Fuller, *Foe Within*, 166.

<sup>81</sup> Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire*, 80; N.S. Kirmel, "Germanskie Shpiony Torgovali v Sibiri Shveinyami Mashinkami 'Zinger,'" *Voенно-Istoricheskii Zhurnal* no. 4 (2002): 50.

<sup>82</sup> "Protocol of the Commission of the All-Russian Zemstvo and Town Associations"; Memorial of the Singer Manufacturing Company as to its Business in Russia, Dec. 13, 1916, box 155, folder 1, Singer Mss; Davies, *Peacefully Working to Conquer the World*, 307.

assimilation, and utility to the empire—rather than from an innate or perceived ethnic nationality. These defense strategies—the only left to Kompaniya Singer—served to cement a *rossiiskii* identity rather than the *russkii* identity valued by the government.

### **Legal Russianness**

From the start of the war, Kompaniya Singer executives devoted great attention to the legal nationalities of their employees and their company. Since the adoption of its 1897 Russian charter, Kompaniya Singer was a legally Russian entity not simply an outpost of its American parent company.<sup>83</sup> Kompaniya Singer viewed itself as a legally Russian institution. Singer’s leadership was content to remove Albert Flohr from power, because they understood that having a legally German subject in control of Kompaniya Singer’s sales division would not support Singer’s Russian identity. They failed to understand, however, that legal considerations did not alleviate ethnic concerns.

The founders and directors of Kompaniya Singer were legally able to incorporate a Russian company, but they were not ethnically Russian. According to the company’s charter, they included a German subject, an American citizen, and a British subject.<sup>84</sup> During the First World War, Singer removed any officials holding “enemy” citizenships. After Flohr’s resignation, Kompaniya Singer claimed that its board of directors was made of one British subject, two American citizens, and two Russian subjects.<sup>85</sup> While these legal citizenships should not have been problematic, they do not tell the whole, multinational story. The British subject was Singer Manufacturing Company President Douglas Alexander. Despite his citizenship, he lived in New York and ran an American multinational enterprise. One of the Americans, Walter Dixon, the director of Singer’s Russian factory, was a naturalized citizen,

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<sup>83</sup> Protocol of the Commission of the All-Russian Zemstvo and Town Associations, box 155, folder 1, Singer Mss.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

having been born British.<sup>86</sup> One of the Russian subjects, Heinrich Bertling, had changed his citizenship from German to Russian in order to facilitate his business dealings in Russia.<sup>87</sup> The other Russian listed, Otto Myslik, Flohr's replacement as Russian sales director, may not have even been a Russian subject.

The question of Myslik's nationality provides a window into Singer's reliance on legal Russianness. While Myslik was labelled as a Russian subject, his biography exhibits a national fluidity that make him difficult to define in national terms. While he is called a Russian subject in 1915, in 1921 Myslik styled himself a "native and citizen of Czecho-Slovakia."<sup>88</sup> This national identification fits with Myslik's Czech surname. Some Austrian subjects of Slavic ancestry were given permission to remain in Russia during the war due to appeals by Slavic charitable organizations, and it could be that Myslik fell into this category.<sup>89</sup> Myslik was born in the predominantly German-speaking city of Liberec, however, and he was born a subject of the Austrian emperor.<sup>90</sup>

The Singer leadership recognized early on the ambiguity of Myslik's nationality and the potential legal problem it entailed. Before the First World War, Myslik had been working for Singer in Constantinople. After the entrance of the Ottoman Empire into the war, Myslik was trapped in Odessa. Singer Manufacturing Company President Douglas Alexander requested that Flohr find a position for Myslik in Russia. Despite his stated desire to retain Myslik within Singer's employ, Alexander urged Flohr to appoint Myslik only provided "there are no objections by reason of the question of nationality or otherwise."<sup>91</sup> Perhaps in recognition of

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<sup>86</sup> Domosh, "American Capitalist Experiments," 46.

<sup>87</sup> Carstensen, *American Enterprise in Foreign Markets*, 80.

<sup>88</sup> Affidavit of Otto Myslik, Sept. 8, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.

<sup>89</sup> Gyl'zhaukhar Kakenovna Kokebaeva, *Germania - Rossiia - SSSR: Politika, Voïna i Plen* (Almaty: Kazak Universiteti, 2009), 80.

<sup>90</sup> "Otto Myslik, Aide of Singer Company [Obituary]," *New York Times*, May 26, 1955.

<sup>91</sup> Alexander to Flohr, Nov. 27, 1914, Micro 2013, Reel 54, Singer Mss.



Myslik's precarious national position, Flohr and Alexander rejected Myslik's request to receive his mail in Singer's Moscow office.<sup>92</sup> Myslik's migration and ambiguous legal and ethnic identity were recognized as a potential problem for Singer, yet he was an improvement over the German Flohr. On paper, at least, Myslik was Russian.

Myslik's Russian subjecthood made him a *rossiiskii* Russian, but it did not ease ethnic concerns. By maintaining that Myslik's legal status made him sufficiently Russian to head Kompaniya Singer's sales division, Singer failed to engage the government's increasing ethnic nationalism. While Flohr's legal Germanness undermined his utility to Singer, the company asserted the legal Russianness of Myslik and his fellow board member Heinrich Bertling. The Germanic names of these Singer executives, however, would not have eased the Russian government's fears. While Myslik and Bertling may have been legally Russian, and in Myslik's case even that seems complicated, they were not ethnic Russians. They fit the *rossiiskii*, but not the *russkii* mold of Russianness. For Singer, this legality was adequate. Myslik was a good employee, who was legally qualified to lead the company, and Singer's executives saw no need to replace him. For the Russian government officials, however, Myslik did not Russify Kompaniya Singer sufficiently to remove the company from suspicion. He was not sufficiently *russkii*.

The disjunction between these *rossiiskii* and *russkii* presentations of Russianness were brought to the fore in Kompaniya Singer's defense before the Zemgor. In August 1915, a commission of officials from the Zemgor met in Singer's Podolsk factory to assess Singer's national and patriotic loyalties.<sup>93</sup> Throughout the summer, Singer's leaders and shop employees had attempted to fight off local sequestrations and business interruptions. The meeting with the

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<sup>92</sup> Flohr to Alexander, Oct. 17, 1914; Alexander to Flohr, Oct. 29, 1914, European Trip – Russia – 1914, box 155, folder 9, Singer Mss.

<sup>93</sup> Protocol of the Commission of the All-Russian Zemstvo and Town Associations, box 155, folder 1, Singer Mss.

Zemgor was a chance to finally clear Kompaniya Singer's name with the imperial government. The eight-man commission included, among a variety of local politicians and bureaucrats, the leaders of both the All-Russia Zemstvo Association and the All-Russia Towns Association. Singer chose Podolsk manager Walter Dixon and factory engineer A.A. Miliukoff to plead its case. As a member of Kompaniya Singer's board of directors, Dixon may seem like an obvious choice. Tellingly, however, Kompaniya Singer did not choose either of its other Russian-based board members. By excluding Myslik and Bertling from this meeting, Singer may have implicitly acknowledged the problematic aspects of their ethnicities. As a British-born American, Dixon did not carry linguistic and ethnic connections to Russia's wartime enemies. The same could not be said for his fellow board members.

Although he could not be easily labelled as an enemy alien, Dixon was still not Russian. In its defense before the Zemgor, Singer sought to mitigate Dixon's foreignness. During the commission's proceedings, Singer leaned upon the Russification of Walter Dixon. Dixon was listed in the proceedings before the Zemgor by his American name, Walter Frank Dixon, but also by his Russian-styled name and patronymic, Vassily Vassilievitch. Moreover, the details of the proceedings state that "the committee could not but draw attention to the fact that W.F. Dixon, during the 20 years he has resided in Russia, has fully mastered the Russian language, which he employs to perfection."<sup>94</sup> Dixon's wife was Russian, and he had lived in the country since 1895.<sup>95</sup> These same things, however, could likely have been said for many of Kompaniya Singer's German and ethnically German leaders. In his study of St. Petersburg's ethnic Germans, Anders Henriksson found a trend of assimilation and national indifference prior to the First World War. Industrial elites "moved in social circles defined by wealth rather than

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Domosh, "American Capitalist Experiments," 46.

ethnicity.”<sup>96</sup> In the nationalistic fervor of 1915, however, Kompaniya Singer’s presentation of a Russified American to the Russian authorities, rather than a Russified German, may be an acknowledgment of the limits of national mutability in wartime. Singer declined the opportunity to paint any of its ethnically German representatives as assimilated Russians. Nonetheless, Kompaniya Singer’s obvious pride in the Russian assimilation of Dixon, a British subject turned American citizen, speaks to its conception of nationalities that are attainable, not ethnic or innate.

### **Utilitarian and Patriotic Russianness**

In addition to stressing the legal standing of its operation, Singer presented itself before the Zemgor as a useful component of the Russian economy and war effort. To the Singer leadership, Kompaniya Singer’s utility made it patriotic. This patriotism implied loyalty and Russianness. By stressing Singer’s importance to the war effort and Russian economy, however, Singer highlighted the extent of Russian reliance on foreign industry and investment. Rather than assuage the concerns of the Russian government, the importance of Singer may have given new cause for suspicion.

Despite the possible downfalls of highlighting Singer’s size and scope, Kompaniya Singer’s wartime utility was an obvious way for Singer executives to show the company’s loyalty to Russia. This approach is curious, however, because Russian industry in general had great difficulty in wartime coordination with the government. As Ruth AmEnde Roosa explains, before spring 1915, the government had shortages of war supplies due to its failure to incorporate industry into war production. Throughout the course of 1915, the political clashes between

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<sup>96</sup> Henriksson, "Nationalism, Assimilation and Identity in Late Imperial Russia," 346.

industry and the government continued to prevent effective mobilization of Russia's industrial might for the war effort.<sup>97</sup>

Despite the government's ineffective use of industry, the Zemgor expected Singer to contribute to Russia's war effort and questioned Dixon about those contributions. In reply, Dixon emphasized the five-million-ruble defense orders being processed by the Podolsk factory and the company's willingness to do more.<sup>98</sup> The war supplies manufactured by Singer are not described in the record, but a few months later, Douglas Alexander warned Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Sazonov, that Singer's continued sequestration would prevent the company from supplying sewing machines to the government or "to contractors who are engaged in the manufacture of military clothing and accoutrements."<sup>99</sup> Kompaniya Singer took obvious pride in its war production and in the recognition afforded by the imperial government. At its 1916 shareholders meeting, Kompaniya Singer boasted that a local government committee had found that 86% of Singer's Podolsk production had been for imperial defense and that an imperial general had praised Singer for its factory's "substantial assistance to the work for the defense" of the empire.<sup>100</sup>

While benefiting monetarily from war contracts, Kompaniya Singer and the Singer Manufacturing Company viewed their commitment to the war effort as an important mark of their Russianness and even expended their resources to bolster this image. The company contributed money to the war effort primarily through its support for the families of its employee soldiers. By late August 1914, the imperial government had mobilized 6,000 Kompaniya Singer

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<sup>97</sup> Ruth AmEnde Roosa, "Russian Industrialists during World War I: The Interaction of Economics and Politics," in *Entrepreneurship in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union*, ed. Gregory Guroff and Fred V. Carstensen (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 162, 169-181.

<sup>98</sup> Protocol of the Commission of the All-Russian Zemstvo and Town Associations; Collection of Decrees and Orders of the Government, box 155, folder 1, Singer Mss.

<sup>99</sup> Russian Visit, Oct. 23-Nov. 17, 1915, European Trip – Russia – 1915, box 155, folder 9, Singer Mss.

<sup>100</sup> Minutes: Nineteenth Ordinary General Meeting of Shareholders of the Kompanija Singer, April 16-May 2, 1916, European Trip – Russia – 1916, box 155, folder 10, Singer Mss.

employees for military action.<sup>101</sup> As Peter Gatrell explains, the government provided payments to the families of these soldiers. Many Russians, however, saw these payments as too low in comparison to the profits they believed industrialists and shopkeepers were making.<sup>102</sup> This impression, joined by patriotism and duty, prompted companies to supplement the incomes of their conscripted workers' families. Kompaniya Singer joined their ranks. On August 21, 1914, Alexander approved Flohr's request to allocate 150,000 rubles to aid the families of its uniformed employees over the course of three months.<sup>103</sup> By May 1916, Kompaniya Singer had given 793,505.67 rubles to the families of its soldier employees.<sup>104</sup> Although cash constraints caused Singer to reduce these payments during the closure crisis of the summer of 1915, there was no discussion of ending them.<sup>105</sup> These payments tied Singer to the empire. Not only was the company contributing to the war effort in order to profit from military contracts, but also it was performing what it saw as its patriotic "duty to give assistance to the families of employees on active service."<sup>106</sup> Kompaniya Singer saw and presented itself as a Russian company, and that Russianness demanded these sorts of patriotic actions.

Despite Singer's legal status and display of patriotic utility, however, the Singer executives in Moscow and New York were unable to free their company from suspicion and government oversight. Government officials repeatedly confirmed the importance of Kompaniya Singer's legal Russian identity and thanked Singer for its wartime production, but they did not remove their inspectors. The Russianness that Singer presented and attempted to embody was not ethnically national enough to be seen as benign. Singer's actions remained

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<sup>101</sup> Alexander to Flohr, Aug. 21, 1914, Micro 2013, Reel 54, Singer Mss.

<sup>102</sup> Gatrell, *Russia's First World War*, 64.

<sup>103</sup> Alexander to Flohr, Aug. 21, 1914, Micro 2013, Reel 54, Singer Mss.

<sup>104</sup> Minutes: Nineteenth Ordinary General Meeting of Shareholders of the Kompanija Singer, April 16-May 2, 1916, European Trip – Russia – 1916, box 155, folder 10, Singer Mss.

<sup>105</sup> Alexander to Myslik, June 14, 1915, Micro 2013, Reel 55, Singer Mss.

<sup>106</sup> Minutes: Nineteenth Ordinary General Meeting of Shareholders of the Kompanija Singer, April 16-May 2, 1916, European Trip – Russia – 1916, box 155, folder 10, Singer Mss.

suspect, and Singer's willingness to engage foreign and multinational connections in its battle with Russian officials was especially problematic.

### **Multinational Russianness**

To bolster its image of utility, the Singer Manufacturing Company called upon its vast multinational network. Douglas Alexander and Walter Dixon leveraged their respective British and American citizenships to seek the aid of those countries' ambassadors and foreign service leaders. While in Russia in 1915 attempting to free his company from government interference, Singer Manufacturing Company President Douglas Alexander gave an interview to a Russian newspaper in which he gave the perspective of an "American financier" on the European war.<sup>107</sup> At Alexander's behest, J.P. Morgan telegraphed the Russian Imperial Minister of Finance affirming the Singer Manufacturing Company's status as "one of the largest and most influential industrial companies in the United States."<sup>108</sup> While these actions were no doubt meant to marshal these international forces in support of Singer, they highlight Singer's foreignness.

Why would highlighting foreign associations with friendly or neutral powers harm Singer's Russian defense? The answer to this question lies in the increasing national unease with Russia's dependence on foreign industry. Eric Lohr has argued that wartime nationalists in the Russian Empire saw themselves as victims of German and foreign dominance (*zasil'e*). Nationalistic rhetoric from business organizations and the imperial government presented a Russian Empire that was controlled by foreign interests.<sup>109</sup> While Singer's conception of its own Russianness could coexist with a multinational identity, the Russian nationalists' conception of Russianness could not.

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<sup>107</sup> Interview with an American Financier, European Trip – Russia – 1915, box 155, folder 9, Singer Mss.

<sup>108</sup> J.P. Morgan to Pierre Bark, Nov. 11, 1915, copied in Singer Manufacturing Company to Lansing, Nov. 12, 1915, Micro 2013, Reel 55, Singer Mss.

<sup>109</sup> Lohr, "Russian Economic Nationalism," 479.

From early 1915, Singer executives consistently used American and British diplomatic channels to plead their case to the Russian government, which added to Singer's foreign appearance. In April 1915, the American consul-general in Moscow, John Snodgrass, certified the American and British character of the Singer Manufacturing Company.<sup>110</sup> Singer executives, particularly Alexander and Dixon, repeatedly reached out to the American ambassador and the United States Department of State. Even before the closure of Singer's stores, Dixon appealed to US Ambassador George Marye for assistance in freeing Kompaniya Singer from government inspection.<sup>111</sup> Between August 1915 and May 1916, Singer executives in New York wrote to the U.S. Department of State in regards to their Russian business at least six times.<sup>112</sup> When Alexander visited Russia in the fall of 1915, he met with the American ambassador before meeting with any Russian government officials.<sup>113</sup> Although Alexander found Ambassador Marye ineffective, an opinion seconded by some historians, the Singer leadership did not abandon their pursuit of diplomatic intervention.<sup>114</sup>

Alexander, a British subject, also reached out to the British diplomatic service. In his October 27, 1915 appeal to British Ambassador Sir George Buchanan, Douglas Alexander stressed the British capital, British debt, and British trading relationship of Kompaniya Singer. Alexander suggested that the British government should seek to help Kompaniya Singer since the Singer factory at Clydebank, Scotland sold supplies and products to the Russian business.<sup>115</sup> While Alexander clearly intended to appeal to wartime patriotism and alliances through his

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<sup>110</sup> Certificate from John H. Snodgrass, April 13/26, 1915, box 155, folder 1, Singer Mss.

<sup>111</sup> Dixon to Marye, May 29/June 11, 1915, box 155, folder 1, Singer Mss.

<sup>112</sup> See letters to State Department, Micro 2013, Reels 54 and 55, Singer Mss.

<sup>113</sup> Russian Visit, Oct. 23-Nov. 17, 1915, European Trip – Russia – 1915, box 155, folder 9, Singer Mss.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid; Donald E. Davis and Eugene P. Trani, *The First Cold War: The Legacy of Woodrow Wilson in U.S.-Soviet Relations*, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 18-23.

<sup>115</sup> Alexander to Sir George Buchanan, October 27, 1915, box 155, folder 1, Singer Mss.

appeal to British authorities, these international appeals may have been interpreted differently within Russia.

Dixon and Alexander's willingness to use diplomatic channels to assist the Russian Singer company highlights the fundamental divide between Singer's conception of Russianness and the Russianness espoused by the government, namely, the multinational character of the Singer Manufacturing Company. From their earliest appeals to foreign powers, Kompaniya Singer executives framed their requests in terms of the importance of the Singer Manufacturing Company to multiple states—Great Britain, the United States, and the Russian Empire. Building on Singer's conception of Russianness as a matter of legality, utility, and patriotic allegiance, the company's executives sought the help of their foreign friends to affirm Singer's usefulness and legitimacy. Rather than substantiate the Russianness of Singer, however, these international appeals solidified Singer's essential foreignness. To proponents of ethnic Russianness, Singer's multinational connections implied Russia's dominance by foreign interests. J.P. Morgan's assurance that Singer was important to the American economy, for instance, likely affirmed the threat of international dominance in Russian industry more than it legitimized Kompaniya Singer. These international connections represented foreign loyalties and undermined whatever ethnic Russianness may have been implied through Singer's claims about the cultural assimilation of its leading employees. The Singer executives were presenting an image of Russianness that was not in conflict with multinationalism and this image was quite different from the ethnic Russianness of nationalists and the imperial government.

### **Defining Wartime Russianness**

These contrasting understandings of Russianness draw attention to the essential difficulty in defining nationalities. While the imperial government and Singer both aspired to Russianness,



they had fundamentally different interpretations of the meaning of the term. While Singer's Russianness may have favored with the nineteenth-century imperial *rossiiskii* identity, it was insufficiently ethnic by the national standards of World War I. During the early years of the twentieth-century, imperial Russian society was in the midst of reimagining and redefining Russianness. This national evolution would bridge the transition from a generally nationally indifferent empire to the Soviet Union's counterintuitive emphasis on national identity under a supranational communist ideology.

Singer's World War I Russianness, however, was not identical to the earlier imperial national indifference. Rather, Singer's attempt at Russian identity was imagined within a multinational and multistate framework. While the Russian Empire incorporated many ethnic groups, it saw these loyalties as inferior to Russian citizenship. Singer, on the other hand, saw its Russianness as a component of its multinational character. Singer's primary goals were successful multinational commerce and profit. Cooperation with the Russian government was fundamentally a means to this end. This national indifference places not only ethnic but also citizenship loyalties below business objectives.

The diverging national understandings of Singer and the Russian imperial government speak to the uneasy relationship between multinational identity and state governments. The Singer Manufacturing Company, as a multinational enterprise, would never have been able to achieve fully the ethnic Russianness advocated by Russian nationalists. The company's survival and profit depended on a supranational administrative structure and the subordination of national loyalty to corporate loyalty. While multinational firms may tailor their staff, systems, or advertising to the culture or national identity of a population, their transnational business model demands that they retain an element of national indifference. For governments that equate

nationality with loyalty, however, the power and national opportunism of these multinational corporations will remain a problem. Multinational corporations are often accused of spreading a globalized or nationally indifferent culture at the expense of a national one. Kompaniya Singer's promotion of a nationally indifferent Russianness may substantiate this claim. The success of ethnic Russian nationalists in challenging Singer's conception of Russian identity, however, complicates this narrative of globalization. In this case, the multinational company was pushed back and stymied by an emergent ethnic nationalism.

Finally, Singer's failure to create a Russianness that would satisfy the government raises a question: To what extent did the Singer executives know that the Russian identity they were generating was at odds with the Russian government's conception of Russianness? Singer was certainly attempting to convince the government of its loyalty and utility, and this investigation has proceeded under the general assumption that Singer attempted to embody the government's conception of Russianness. Because of Singer's multinational objectives and foreign origin, however, this embodiment was impossible and undesirable. From within their nationally indifferent corporate structure, did Singer executives realize that their trappings of Russianness failed to meet the government's nationalistic standards of Russianness? Many of Singer's executives lived distinctly non-national lives. Employees like Dixon and Bertling changed their citizenships to advance their business objectives, while Alexander, Myslik, and Flohr lived in various foreign countries to facilitate their careers. These employees seem to be perfect examples of Zahra's national indifference. For many of Singer's employees, their career ambitions and Singer itself were more important factors in their identity than was nationality or ethnicity. Viewing their situations through the lens of corporate loyalty and national indifference, Singer's leaders approached Russianness very differently than did the government.

## Chapter 3

### Company Men during the Revolution

While Kompaniya Singer's multinational associations were a liability during the early years of the First World War, this same transnational character became a useful asset for the company's employees during and after the Russian Revolution. As life within the former Russian Empire devolved into uncertainty in 1917, the Singer Manufacturing Company became a powerful ally for many of Kompaniya Singer's employees. Although Singer employees experienced the revolutions and Civil war from different geographic and social positions, Singer's transnational networks and the help they could offer drew many employees into close relationships with the company. These employees came to rely on Singer. Although they may not have used the term, they became company men.

The concept of a company man has gained a negative connotation, yet Singer's employees did not see their association with the company in negative terms. Scholarly profiles of company men have focused on the submission and unexamined obedience of the employee, but the experiences of Singer's employees reveal a different sort of corporate loyalty. While company men have traditionally been portrayed as blind followers of a powerful and possibly malevolent corporation, Singer's employees chose to align with Singer as an ally and helpmate in the face of the malevolence they perceived in the rising Soviet state. Rather than an inhibitor of individuality and freedom, Singer was perceived by its company men as an aid in their own liberation.

This image of an employer as a liberating force is very different from the customary image of submissive company man, which reached its zenith at the height of the Cold War. The company man originated as a moniker for loyal company employees in the early 1900s. By the

1920s, the term had been adopted by union leaders of the as a slur against suspected managerial spies or workers who neglected their own best interest in favor of their employers.<sup>116</sup> To some extent, these early company men were viewed as stooges. Unable to realize their own best interests, they latched on to a company that, so the union members thought, was abusive or exploitative. In the 1950s, the view of company men shifted, though it did not become more positive. In a widely circulated book, William H. Whyte, Jr. famously reduced the company man to a blindly following and dependent “organization man.” For Whyte, the “organization man” represented a fearfully conformist and uninspired paper pusher. Large military-industrial corporations of the post-World War II era (Whyte mentions such giants as DuPont and Lockheed.) needed legions of white-collar professionals to further their corporate objectives, and their ranks were filled with organization men. Such employees were content to enter a company in their twenties, rise through its ranks, and retire without pushing the limits of conformity. They were modern, bureaucratic middlemen, who Whyte holds in negative comparison to earlier American entrepreneurs motivated by the American Dream and the “Protestant work ethic.”<sup>117</sup> In a post-World War II society in which totalitarian ideologies seemed poised to strip away individual freedoms, companies and corporations became yet one more behemoth institution eclipsing the individual.

For the company men of Kompaniya Singer, however, individuality and individual freedom were instrumental in their decision to remain company men. Many employees chose to stay tied to Singer during the Russian Civil War, because they saw the multinational corporation as an avenue to freedom. The experiences of several such employees were recorded in affidavits given to Singer between 1920 and 1934. These affidavits, as well as correspondence between

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<sup>116</sup> For information on the evolution of the term “company man,” see the Oxford English Dictionary entry for “company.”

<sup>117</sup> William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 3-5, 130.

Singer's management, reveal the liberating potential and the hardships of being Singer company men.

Although each employee's story recounts the Russian Revolution and the Civil War, the challenges faced by the employees varied widely by place and time. Before the First World War, Singer's sales network had reached from Poland in the west to Vladivostok in the east. World War I wreaked havoc on many of Singer's Polish and Ukrainian shops, but the rest of the Company's network continued, somewhat worse for wear, into the two revolutions of 1917. Historians have written of the piecemeal nationalization of Kompaniya Singer, which drove the company to leave Soviet Russia entirely by 1924 and sustain losses of over \$100 million, but they have devoted little attention to varied plights of the 30,000 Kompaniya Singer employees that participated in or fought against this confiscation. Across the former Russian Empire, Singer's employees faced different armies, different climates, different corporate infrastructures, and different types of revolutionary fervor in a variety of locales. For these men and women, the demise and nationalization of Kompaniya Singer were more important in their details than in their summation. In these varied situations, Singer's company men needed and received different sorts of aid and support.

There was much that Singer could offer to its company men. In the vignettes that follow, this chapter investigates the patterns of crisis and action that marked these employees' revolutionary and wartime experiences. They were not simply conformist company men, but individually motivated employees caught in the tumultuously modern chaos of the Russian Revolution and Civil War. Amid violent uncertainty, the affidavit writers perceived tangible and empowering benefits to be gained from retaining or deepening their connections to Singer's transnational network.

## Factory Workers and Management: Kazimierz Owczarski

While the traditional Marxist narrative of revolution is set in a factory, the events at Singer's Podolsk factory are rarely recounted in the employees' affidavits. Only five of the affidavit writers had worked at Podolsk. Three employees—Max Cruetzburg, Herman Bludeau, and Wilhelm Brüggert—left the factory before the revolution. Ethnic Germans, each man had been arrested early in the war and spent time interned in the Russian interior during World War I. While their paths intersected with Kompaniya Singer after the War, they never returned to jobs at the Russian factory. W.F. Dixon, the factory director, left Podolsk after offering the factory to the Provisional Government. He travelled to Moscow, before leaving Russia for the United States.<sup>118</sup> Only one of the affidavit subjects, Kazimierz Owczarski, remained at the factory during and after its nationalization. What was it that tied this small group of factory employees to Singer during the revolution? How were they different from Singer's other Podolsk employees?

Like the four other Podolsk affidavit subjects, Owczarski held a managerial role at the factory; class played an important role in distinguishing the affidavit writers from the majority of Singer's Podolsk workforce.<sup>119</sup> Conflict between workers and management had festered at Podolsk since 1905. Consistent with that year's general movements toward unionization and political unrest in Russia, the Podolsk workers issued a set of demands to their superiors. These demands included calls for reduced hours and increased pay.<sup>120</sup> Factory director Walker Dixon wanted to compromise with some of these demands, but the New York Singer executives

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<sup>118</sup> Davies, *Peacefully Working to Conquer the World*, 315.

<sup>119</sup> Dixon was the factory director. Creutzburg was a department manager. Brüggert was a foreman. Bludeau describes himself as a department manager in his 1921 affidavit, but as a foreman in his 1930 affidavit. See Affidavit of Max Creutzburg, August 12, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.; Affidavit of Wilhelm Brüggert, September 10, 1930, box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss.; Affidavit of Herman Bludeau, August 12, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.; Affidavit of Hermann Bludeau, August 25, 1930, box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss.

<sup>120</sup> Davies, *Peacefully Working to Conquer the World*, 269.

decided against compromise.<sup>121</sup> Unable to reach an accord, the Podolsk workers went on strike on November 30, 1905. Dixon closed the factory through the Moscow general strike of early December.<sup>122</sup> Despite Dixon's attempts to sow goodwill after the strike, the chasm between factory workers and management widened.<sup>123</sup> Additional strikes followed in 1913 and 1915.<sup>124</sup> Long before the First World War or the February Revolution, the Podolsk factory was rife with conflict.

The upheaval of 1917 only furthered these conflicts between labor and management. In June 1917, the factory directors were given a list of demands from a workers' council. Although this council claimed to represent all of Singer's employees, both factory workers and sales staff, the fallout from these demands would be most resounding at the Podolsk factory. Singer met some of the workers' demands, but management refused to accept all of the council's suggestions. Rather, the company decided to cease production in Russia.<sup>125</sup> On October 6, Kompaniya Singer offered its factory to the Provisional Government for use in the war effort. Singer stopped making sewing machines in Russia even before the Bolsheviks took control.<sup>126</sup> In 1920, the factory officially became the First Soviet State Sewing Machine Factory (*Glavshveimashin*).<sup>127</sup>

Singer's offer of the factory to the Provisional Government was likely seen as a temporary fix. In the 1950s, Singer attempted to reclaim its losses in Russia through the United States Foreign Claims Settlement Commission (FCSC), and the fate of the Podolsk factory

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<sup>121</sup> Domosh, "Labor Geographies," 1680.

<sup>122</sup> Davies, *Peacefully Working to Conquer the World*, 270.

<sup>123</sup> Domosh, "Labor Geographies," 1681, 1684.

<sup>124</sup> Davies, *Peacefully Working to Conquer the World*, 295; Myra Page, *Soviet Main Street* (Moscow: Co-operative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the U.S.S.R., 1933), 24.

<sup>125</sup> Domosh, "Labor Geographies," 1684.

<sup>126</sup> Davies, *Peacefully Working to Conquer the World*, 315.

<sup>127</sup> Affidavit of Jean Petrovitch Dekscheneck, August 18, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.; Page, *Soviet Main Street*, 27.

features prominently in the claim. According to the claim, Kompaniya Singer leased the factory to the Provisional Government for four months, ending in December 1917. By December, the Bolsheviks had come to power. Hoping to secure Singer's holdings, Myslik arranged with the Soviet authorities to extend the government's lease through September 1918. As the FCSC claim explains, however, by September 1918 the factory was firmly in Soviet hands and "no vestige of the Russian Company's [Kompaniya Singer's] ownership remained."<sup>128</sup> The factory, the only Russian-based manufacturer of sewing machines, was counted among Singer's most significant losses. Singer calculated its 1917 value as over \$4 million dollars.<sup>129</sup>

The Podolsk factory was obviously one of Singer's most important possessions within Russia, and for managers like Owczarski it represented opportunities for advancement. Owczarski had worked at Podolsk since 1898. Originally a mechanic, he rose to become manager of the stand department and shipment of machines and parts at Podolsk.<sup>130</sup> While factory workers would later reflect on their poor living quarters, Owczarski owned a "small house" in the city.<sup>131</sup> In the socially stratified climate of Podolsk, Owczarski's material wealth and elevated position put him on the side of the management. After 1917, however, the Singer management had clearly lost the battle of Podolsk. Owczarski remembered that, after the factory's nationalization, "any one [*sic*] who wished still to keep up his work in favour of the enterprise came at once under suspicion and was thrown into prison and shot, and therefore everyone was trying to keep away."<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Statement of Claim against the Government of Soviet Russia, Claim No. Sov--40,920, 5, box 156, folder 1, Singer Mss.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>130</sup> Affidavit of Kazimierz Owczarski, October 30, 1930, box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss.

<sup>131</sup> Page, *Soviet Main Street*, 19; Affidavit of Kazimierz Owczarski, October 30, 1930, box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss.

<sup>132</sup> Affidavit of Kazimierz Owczarski, October 30, 1930, box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss.



Owczarski and the four other Podolsk representatives among the affidavit subjects were on the wrong side of a workers' revolution. Equated with capitalistic management, they were outcasts from the revolution. This disconnect between Singer's management and workers has been explored by geographer Mona Domosh, as she has investigated both the cultural embeddedness of Singer's leadership and the mechanisms of Singer's sewing machine production in Russia. Domosh explains that, as early as 1906, Dixon separated himself physically from his employees by housing his office in a building removed from the factory. While acknowledging that it is impossible to know whether Dixon made this decision because of the strikes, Domosh argues that "the enduring effect of the building was to denote and legitimize hierarchical relationships between workers, low-level managers and staff, and Dixon himself."<sup>133</sup> The factory director eyed his employees with suspicion, but the experiences of Owczarski and the other Podolsk affidavit writers suggest that Dixon was not alone. At least some of Dixon's direct subordinates also felt alienated from their workers.

Perhaps the best example of this class tension in the Singer factory is represented by Owczarski's house. Although Owczarski does not go into detail about his situation in Podolsk, he does mourn the loss of his house. The house, which Owczarski says he "acquired after many years hard work," was taken by the Bolshevik authorities when he departed Russia.<sup>134</sup> To Owczarski, this home was a symbol of his success, but for some workers who remained in Soviet Russia, houses like Owczarski's exemplified Singer's mistreatment of its workers. In 1933, American Journalist Myra Page travelled to Podolsk to investigate life within a Soviet city. Page spoke with workers who had lived and worked in Podolsk before the revolution. Thanks to her

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<sup>133</sup> Domosh, "American Capitalist Experiments," 47.

<sup>134</sup> Affidavit of Kazimierz Owczarski, October 30, 1930, box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss.

discussions with these employees, Page offers a different interpretation of the housing situation in Podolsk:

Deliberately he [Dixon] set about building up a small labour aristocracy from among the foremen and skilled workers, making them dependent on the firm's favour. To them he made loans of a thousand or fifteen hundred rubles, to build houses.... These loans he rarely asked back, but used them for pressure, keeping his foremen indebted and faithful to the company. The majority of the workers he scornfully ignored. For them not one house was built. They were left to find huts like Feodor or rent "corners" of rooms, like Andree and his family, and to worry over making ends meet, as best they could.<sup>135</sup>

While Page's language is perhaps overly dramatic, and her observations reflect the propaganda purposes of her publication, there remains a significant contrast between her narration and Owczarski's. Where Owczarski saw his own success and achievement reflected in his house, workers like Feodor and Andree interpreted the house as an underhanded gift of Kompaniya Singer. Moreover, it was a gift they were incapable of attaining.

Divisions of interpretation like these help to account for the small representation of factory employees among the affidavit writers. The linemen of the Podolsk factory, whose professional and class interests more readily aligned with the Bolsheviks, are completely absent from the Singer affidavits. For the factory workers, Singer and factory management had long been an adversary. For members of the factory management, like Owczarski, Singer had long been a resource. These two paths continued during the revolution.

Adjacent to this class-based analysis, however, is another important factor. While the five Podolsk affidavit subjects were not members of the proletariat, they were also ethnic outsiders in Podolsk. In his studies of Kompaniya Singer's factory, Fred V. Carstensen found that the majority of the Podolsk laborers and foremen were ethnically Russian.<sup>136</sup> None of the affidavit subjects from Podolsk were Russian. Dixon, as has been discussed, was a naturalized

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<sup>135</sup> Page, *Soviet Main Street*, 19.

<sup>136</sup> Carstensen, *American Enterprise in Foreign Markets*, 71-72.

American, born in Britain. Creutzberg, Bludau, and Brüggert were ethnically German and moved to Germany after leaving Russia.<sup>137</sup> Owczarski was Polish.

Owczarski was born in Poland and his Polish nationality was his eventual ticket out of the Soviet Union. Although portions of Poland had been included in the Russian Empire for many years, the role of Poles and Polish nationalism within the Empire had long been a source of contention and conflict.<sup>138</sup> This national animosity did not disappear with the revolution. Poland's reemergence on the map of Europe, combined with the failed Soviet conquest of Poland, made the place of Poles living in Russia even more complex.<sup>139</sup> Owczarski does not state which year he left Podolsk, but the fact that he continued working in the factory after it was nationalized makes it likely that he returned to Poland after the Red Army's failure in the Polish-Soviet War. Owczarski's Polish nationality combined with his managerial position to set him apart at Podolsk. Both by class and nationality, he was different from the majority of Singer's Podolsk employees. These differences put Owczarski at odds with the new Soviet state.

Owczarski's national identity would not have had the same implications in his relationship with Singer. Singer was a multinational corporation, whose outposts reached around the globe. For men like Owczarski, who wished to be repatriated, Singer's multinational business model could be helpful in securing a position in their ethnic homeland or their country of citizenship. By 1930, Owczarski was a Singer manager in Warsaw and a Polish citizen.<sup>140</sup> The other affidavit subjects from Podolsk all eventually worked at Singer factories in their countries of citizenship: Cruetzburg, Bludeau, and Brüggert in Wittenberg; Dixon in Elizabeth,

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<sup>137</sup> Affidavit of Max Creutzburg, August 12, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.; Affidavit of Wilhelm Brüggert, September 10, 1930, box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss.; Affidavit of Hermann Bludau, August 25, 1930, box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss.

<sup>138</sup> See Theodore R. Weeks, *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia*.

<sup>139</sup> For more on displaced Poles in Revolutionary Russia, see Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), Chapter 7 "Refugees and the Construction of 'National' Identity."

<sup>140</sup> Affidavit of Kazimierz Owczarski, October 30, 1930, box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss.

New Jersey.<sup>141</sup> Singer was a useful connection for the national and economic outsiders at the Podolsk factory. The reach of Singer's usefulness, however, may have been limited to employees in managerial positions. Like traditional company men, Owczarski and the other Podolsk affidavit writers were members of the management. It is unclear whether workers would have been able to access Singer's resources. As the company had been a source of advancement and material gain for the managerial employees in Podolsk, so it became a source of security outside of Russia. Faced with upheaval in Russia, Singer became a lifeline for this small group of factory workers. For those managers in a position to access Singer's networks, the company became a source of employment and economic security beyond the Russian border.

### **Moscow Executives and the Ukrainian Route: Otto Myslik**

The hope of continued foreign employment with Singer was not limited to Singer's factory management. Many members of Singer's sales and executive staff envisioned similar futures with Singer, and many would realize them. Nearly half (twenty-three) of the affidavit subjects mention working for Singer after leaving Russia, and it is possible that others simply failed to mention their employment with Singer. Those that did mention their jobs in the 1920s and 1930s were working in a variety of positions throughout Singer's network in disparate locations across Europe and North America. Like the affidavit subjects from Podolsk, many of Kompaniya Singer's sales managers were not ethnically Russian, and they faced many similar national and class-based conflicts.

For members of Singer's sales staff and management, however, the unfolding of the revolution and civil war was quite different from the progression at the factory. The closure of Singer's sales apparatus was a slow and piecemeal process that varied greatly across the Russian

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<sup>141</sup> Affidavit of Max Creutzburg, August 12, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.; Affidavit of Wilhelm Brüggert, September 10, 1930, box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss.; Affidavit of Hermann Bludau, August 25, 1930, box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss.; "Walter Dixon, 70, Engineer, Is Dead," *New York Times*, June 19, 1935.

lands. After Podolsk ceased producing sewing machines in 1917, Singer's large sales network continued selling imported machines and collecting payment on its trademark credit sales. The workers' council that made demands to the Podolsk leadership had taken on the mantle of sales employees along with factory workers, but it is unclear how deep this united front truly ran. There were examples of labor unrest among the sales staff, but they were generally geographically isolated. Some cities, including Warsaw and Yaroslavl, faced persistent difficulties in labor relations in the years before 1917, but this problem was not universal.<sup>142</sup> The sequestration addressed in the previous chapter and the territorial losses of World War I were larger disruptions for the sales division, forcing shop closures long before the revolutions.

The year 1917 brought a mixed bag of effects for Kompaniya Singer's sales divisions. Following the February Revolution, the tsarist government inspectors that had plagued Singer since 1915 were finally removed.<sup>143</sup> The freedom afforded by this removal was tempered by the uncertainty and instability of the government. After the Bolshevik rise to power, this uncertainty mounted as Singer's position became more precarious.

Kompaniya Singer's Moscow headquarters were confronted with Bolshevism soon after the October Revolution. Singer's director, Czech-born Otto Myslik, was responsible for all of Singer's Russian business. Adapting to the changing situations, Myslik did his best to hold together the Company's wide network. One of Myslik's key strategies was the appearance of cooperation with the ideals of bolshevism. In early 1918, Myslik attempted to preemptively forestall nationalization by asking the Committee of the Moscow Industrial District to appoint a government overseer for Kompaniya Singer. The man appointed, Ephim Roubine, was a known

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<sup>142</sup> Cartensen, *American Enterprise in Foreign Markets*, 81-82.

<sup>143</sup> Davies, *Peacefully Working to Conquer the World*, 307.

commodity and friendly to Singer.<sup>144</sup> Roubine was so friendly to Singer that after leaving Russia in 1925, he became a Singer employee in Beirut.<sup>145</sup> Through Roubine, Myslik was able to maintain his—and Singer’s—control of the Russian enterprise.

Roubine was granted an entirely new position. He was put in charge of Singer’s Extraordinary Committee of the Highest Economical Council of the People—a name that was chosen, one employee remembered, because of its “imposing” sound.<sup>146</sup> When it became necessary to appoint a new head for this committee, the Soviet committee overseer appointed a Mr. Schick, a friend of Roubine’s and, as Kompaniya Singer’s former bookkeeper recalled, “a Bolshevik only in name.”<sup>147</sup> Through Roubine and Schick, Myslik continued to oversee the day to day operation of Singer’s Soviet sales division through 1919.

The situation in Moscow became increasingly fraught, however, and Myslik left the city in July 1918. Only a few days earlier, a formal decree had nationalized the Singer shops within Soviet Russia. Despite this decree, Myslik and Singer’s New York leadership were not prepared to write off the Russian business. Many Singer shops in the south and east of Russia were not under the Bolshevik jurisdiction. The Civil war was being waged, and it was far from clear who would emerge victorious. Relocating to non-Soviet held cities in Ukraine, Myslik continued to oversee the business in the non-Soviet South.<sup>148</sup>

Coordinating with Singer leadership in New York, Myslik sought unsuccessfully to maintain normal operations in Ukraine and South Russia. Since supply lines were cut off from the Russian capitals, the American Singer Manufacturing Company began to ship machines and

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<sup>144</sup> Roubine’s name is also recorded as “Rubin,” see Affidavit of Otto Myslik, September 8, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.

<sup>145</sup> Statement of Ephim Roubine, n.d., box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss.

<sup>146</sup> Affidavit of Emil L. Fridlender, August 16, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Affidavit of Otto Myslik, September 8, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss

supplies into Ukrainian and Southern Russian ports.<sup>149</sup> Although Singer's business continued in the non-Soviet towns of Ukraine and Southern Russia, it was far from business as usual. Shops were cut off from Singer's management when their towns were taken by Red Army soldiers. When White troops recaptured cities during the course of the war, many of these undersupplied shops reconnected with Singer.<sup>150</sup>

Myslik negotiated these changes for Singer's business, while also attempting to secure his own safety. As the War progressed through Ukraine, Myslik bounced from city to city in the Russian and Ukrainian south. Between July 1918 and March 1919, he resided alternately in Kiev, Kharkov, and Odessa.<sup>151</sup> In March 1919, the Soviets took over Ukraine. During that same month, Myslik left the former Russian Empire for good. Like many others fleeing the Soviet lands, Myslik landed in Constantinople.<sup>152</sup> From there, and later London, he continued to communicate with Singer-controlled shops in the former Russian Empire.

Myslik, like factory director W.F. Dixon, was early to leave Russia. While other employees lingered in Russia and the Soviet Union, either by choice or by inability to leave, these two were removed quickly. As *Kompaniya Singer's* highest ranking employees they had the monetary resources and personal connections to facilitate their departure from Russia. Moreover, more than anyone else in *Kompaniya Singer*, these two men personified the management and the bourgeoisie. In the midst of a Russian and proletarian revolution, they were neither. While factory managers like Owczarski were the low-level enforcers of company policy, Myslik was the orchestrator of such policies. Before and after 1917, both Myslik and

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Letter to Douglas Alexander, March 25, 1919, box 157, folder 4, Singer Mss.

<sup>151</sup> Affidavit of Otto Myslik, September 8, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss

<sup>152</sup> For other first-hand accounts of refugees travelling from Ukraine to Constantinople, see Norman Stone and Michael Glenny, *The Other Russia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 72-73, 150-153, 165-166, 282.

Dixon actively opposed workers' councils and strikers on behalf of Singer.<sup>153</sup> They personified the old, capitalist order and there was no spot for them in Bolshevik Russia. Myslik, whose position as a Russian (or, at least non-German) subject had made him an ideal candidate to lead Kompaniya Singer during the First World War was no longer secure within Russia. Before or soon after the Bolsheviks came to power in a locale, Myslik left. His departures were aided by Singer. Although he retained responsibility for the leadership of Kompaniya Singer, he remained outside of Russia after 1919.

Myslik and Dixon were not alone in their flight. Others who personified the old order may have found it difficult, not to mention undesirable, to transition to the new. Nicolai Vasilievitch Teslenko, for example, was Kompaniya Singer's chief lawyer. Although not strictly speaking an employee of Singer, Teslenko followed nearly the same plan as Myslik in leaving Russia. He proceeded to non-Soviet portions of Ukraine before sailing to Constantinople and Paris. Teslenko had been a member of the Imperial Duma, the Moscow City Council and Zemstvo, and a board member for a large bank.<sup>154</sup> He, like Myslik and Dixon, would never have been perceived as a revolutionary. The only option left was to leave Russia when the Soviets advanced.

Without the ability to be accepted in the new political reality, Myslik and his peers chose to bind themselves to Singer. Like Owczarski, Myslik could be assured of Singer's multinational perspective and the potential of a professional future with Singer outside of Russia. Myslik's personal ties to Singer, however, were even deeper than Owczarski's. While the factory manager could thank Singer for his middle-class lifestyle, Singer was the source of Myslik's

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<sup>153</sup> See Domosh, "Labor Geographies," 1676-1686 and Affidavit of Otto Myslik, September 8, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.

<sup>154</sup> Affidavit of Nicolai Vasilievitch Teslenko, August 17, 1921, 461.11 Si 6, *Records of the Department of State Relating to U.S. Claims Against Russia, 1910-1929* (National Archives Microfilm Publication T640, roll 8), RG 59, NACP.



even greater economic and social security. Having risen to a powerful and secure leadership position within the Singer infrastructure, he had reason to remain tightly connected to the Singer Manufacturing Company. In addition to receiving professional aid from the company, Myslik had been the provider of aid on behalf of the company. Kompaniya Singer was an instrument of Myslik's ambitions and goals, as he had led and fashioned it. It was reasonable that Myslik and Dixon, who had gained so much from Kompaniya Singer and contributed so much to its design, would believe in the rightness of their company and the wrongness of the revolution. Perhaps more so than any of the other affidavit writers, Myslik and Dixon had cause to be loyal to Singer. Singer had given them much, and they had good reason to trust that it would continue to do so.

### **Clerks in the Capital Cities: Emil Fridlender**

Although Myslik quickly left Russia, many of his employees in Moscow did not. Those sales employees and members of the Kompaniya Singer central leadership who remained in Moscow and Petrograd during the Civil war faced many difficult and tragic circumstances. Two employees mentioned battling typhus, while others mentioned the illnesses or deaths of their children and families.<sup>155</sup> An extreme example, Alfred Espenberg, Singer's Central Agency Manager at Petrograd, witnessed the death of his only child in August 1920, followed only a few months later by the murder of his wife and the robbery of his home.<sup>156</sup> Reflecting on his experience in 1921, Espenberg summarized that "the conditions in Petrograd are in the last stages of desperation."<sup>157</sup> Nine years later, he remembered his years in Soviet Petrograd as "the most difficult times of my life."<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Affidavit of Max Creutzburg, August 12, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.; Affidavit of Willy Rutencrantz, August 12, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.; Affidavit of Jan Myslik, August 21, 1930, box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss.

<sup>156</sup> Affidavit of Alfred Espenberg, August 18, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Affidavit of Alfred Espenberg, August 27, 1930, box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss.

In his affidavits and a letter written immediately after leaving Russia, Emil L. Fridlender was even more forthright in his depiction of the hardships of life in revolutionary Russia.<sup>159</sup> Fridlender had been Kompaniya Singer's chief bookkeeper since the outbreak of World War I. Before coming to Moscow, Fridlender's career with Kompaniya Singer had already taken him across the Russian Empire, including stints in Samara, Orenburg, and Tomsk.<sup>160</sup> An experienced and trusted presence in Singer's Moscow office, Fridlender remained in Moscow until 1920 at the direction of Otto Myslik.<sup>161</sup> Staying in Moscow longer than Myslik, Fridlender witnessed first-hand later stages in Singer's nationalization. In June 1919, Fridlender personally opened Singer's safety deposit boxes for the Bolsheviks' sequestration.<sup>162</sup> As bookkeeper, he recorded the lack of installment payments, as sewing machine purchasers were unable to pay for their machines. Eventually, the Soviet authorities claimed that they, not Singer, were the rightful recipients of these payments.<sup>163</sup> In short, Fridlender witnessed the slow decay of Singer's Moscow business.

Beyond professional observations, Fridlender also recounted the difficulty of life in Soviet Moscow. Although less dramatic than Espenberg's tragedy, Fridlender's personal journey was trying. By remaining in Moscow, he was separated for nearly two years from his family, which it seems had already left for Fridlender's native Latvia.<sup>164</sup> When Fridlender was finally prepared to leave Moscow, even that was a challenge. Twice he attempted to secretly cross the Russian-Latvian border. When these attempts failed, a contact in the Cheka Evacuation Department assisted Fridlender in registering as a Latvian refugee. He traveled for eleven days

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<sup>159</sup> Fridlender's name is also spelled "Friedländer" and "Friedlender" in the cited material. In the text, I have retained the spelling used on his affidavits.

<sup>160</sup> Affidavit of Emil L. Fridlender, August 16, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.

<sup>161</sup> Letter from E.L. Friedländer to Otto Myslik, September 29, 1920, box 157, folder 5, Singer Mss.

<sup>162</sup> Affidavit of Emil L. Fridlender, August 16, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Letter from E.L. Friedländer to Otto Myslik, September 29, 1920, box 157, folder 5, Singer Mss.

in a “cattle-truck” to escape Russia, arriving in Riga in October 1920.<sup>165</sup> Destitute upon his arrival in Latvia, Fridlender pleaded with Myslik for a job, which it seems likely he received by the mid-1920s.<sup>166</sup>

Beyond his personal circumstances, Fridlender’s description of life in Soviet Russia is quite bleak. Food supplies were insufficient. There was not enough fuel for heating. Buildings were dismantled so that their wood could be burned for warmth.<sup>167</sup> Even the account books held by one of the Petrograd banks with which Kompaniya Singer did business had been burned as fuel.<sup>168</sup> In evocative language, Fridlender described this world as “the Hell of Soviet Russia” and a land where “nothing but ruin and desolation remains.”<sup>169</sup>

Clearly, Fridlender had no affinity for the revolution. It had left him destitute and without a job. Fridlender and his middle-management colleagues had, like Myslik, gained respect and position from Singer. In comparison to upheaval and chaos they experienced in the Civil war, Singer would seem a stable alternative. Yet, Singer also caused difficulties for Fridlender. It was Singer, through Myslik, that expected him to remain in Moscow as long as he did. It was his past association with Singer that made the Bolsheviks look on him and the other former Singer employees, as he remembered, “with mistrust and ill will.”<sup>170</sup> Singer or his connection with Singer was a source of many problems for Fridlender. While Bolshevik attacks

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<sup>165</sup> Affidavit of Emil L. Fridlender, September 30, 1930, 461.11 Si 6, *Records of the Department of State Relating to U.S. Claims Against Russia, 1910-1929* (National Archives Microfilm Publication T640, roll 8), RG 59, NACP.

<sup>166</sup> Letter from E.L. Friedländer to Otto Myslik, September 29, 1920, box 157, folder 5, Singer Mss.; Translation of Letter from Friedlender to Myslik, March 17, 1926, European Trip—Russia—1926, Document No. 22, 11, box 155, folder 10, Singer Mss. The context of this letter suggests Fridlender was working for Singer, though his affidavits do not mention a job with the company.

<sup>167</sup> Affidavit of Emil L. Fridlender, August 16, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Affidavit of Emil L. Fridlender, September 30, 1930, 461.11 Si 6, *Records of the Department of State Relating to U.S. Claims Against Russia, 1910-1929* (National Archives Microfilm Publication T640, roll 8), RG 59, NACP.

on his employer may have pushed Fridlender toward greater corporate identification and loyalty, there were other forces that pushed employees like Fridlender to stay close to Singer.

Within the often-horrible environment of Russia's war-torn capitals, material assistance was invaluable. A company of Singer's size, even during its local subsidiary's demise, had the potential to provide such assistance to Fridlender and his colleagues. Many of Singer's employees remarked on the growth of the barter economy within Soviet cities, and Singer had material goods. Klara Nylaender, who, like Fridlender, worked in Kompaniya Singer's Moscow cash department, commented on these material benefits. In 1919, when the company was still being run covertly by Myslik through Schick, each employee was given a sewing machine to trade for essential goods.<sup>171</sup> A year later, "the management gave to each employee secretly 100 reels of cotton."<sup>172</sup> These gifts did not meet all of the employees' basic needs, but they were a good start. In order to gain access to these types of goods, employees needed to remain close to the company and its leaders. Close ties to Singer, as even Fridlender's rather mundane interactions with the Bolshevik authorities revealed, brought risks. Former employees of Singer, according to Fridlender, were viewed with suspicion by the Bolshevik authorities and were "in constant danger of losing their positions."<sup>173</sup> Undoubtedly these risks increased after Schick's death in later 1919 and Myslik's resulting loss of influence over the company's operations. For men and women in dire straits, however, the possibility of gaining much needed resources could make the risk worthwhile.

When corporate gifts came up short, bartering goods could also be stolen. Where stocks of supplies and sewing machines remained in shops and warehouses throughout Russia, they

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<sup>171</sup> Affidavit of Klara Nylaender, August 16, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Affidavit of Emil L. Fridlender, September 30, 1930, 461.11 Si 6, *Records of the Department of State Relating to U.S. Claims Against Russia, 1910-1929* (National Archives Microfilm Publication T640, roll 8), RG 59, NACP.

were attractive to thieves. Many of these thieves were Singer's own employees, and several of the affidavits allude to their actions. Kuno Ganzel, a superintendent in Kompaniya Singer's Moscow headquarters, and Herman Jaroschka, a manager in Kherson, spoke of the objects taken by Singer's employees.<sup>174</sup> Longtime employee Jean Petrovitch Dekscheneck put it succinctly: "A great deal of the property in the various agencies, depots or warehouses and the shops was taken by former employees, by soldiers of various armies, or destroyed."<sup>175</sup>

In order to steal, one either needs the authority or the proximity to do so. There must be some level of access. While soldiers gained this access through authority and force, Singer's employees and past employees had proximity and know-how. While none of the affidavit writers mention the potential to steal goods as a reason for staying associated with Kompaniya Singer and *Glavshveimashin*, the material wealth of the company should not be overlooked. The potential generosity of the company in bestowing gifts on its workers was accompanied by the more sinister possibility of taking those good without permission. In either case, closeness to Singer could bring material rewards beyond the meager allocations given by the government.

### **Managers on the Far Reaches of the Empire: Voldemar Ernst**

In addition to providing material assistance, Singer could also open doors for its employees. As a multinational corporation headquartered in the United States, the Singer Manufacturing Company had access to powerful foreign allies. These foreign, and predominantly American, contacts were especially valuable for Singer employees living in the far reaches of the former Russian Empire.

Through the port cities of Arkhangelsk and Vladivostok, the United States became directly involved in the Civil war. The American Polar Bear Expedition, despite its failure to

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<sup>174</sup> Affidavit of Kuno Ganzel, August 10, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.; Affidavit of Herman Jaroschka, October 10, 1930, box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss.

<sup>175</sup> Affidavit of Jean Petrovitch Dekscheneck, August 18, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.

turn the tide in the Civil war, occupied Arkhangelsk for nearly a year from the fall of 1918 to the summer of 1919. Similarly, American forces were based in Vladivostok from 1918 to 1920. The involvement of the American government in these regions provided Singer and its employees with valuable contacts and protection. Singer's shops remained open, as did communication with the company's New York leadership. For Singer's employees in these American outposts, the Civil war had a distinctly international context.

The experiences of Kompaniya Singer's Siberian manager, Voldemar Wilhelm Ernst, reflect this international dimension. Ernst, who unlike the other employees discussed in this chapter was born in Russia, began his career with Kompaniya Singer in Orenburg in 1903. At the time of the revolutions, he was directing Singer's Siberian business from Irkutsk.<sup>176</sup> Far from the action of the capital cities, Ernst did not experience the effects of the Bolshevik revolution in the same way as Singer's employees in European Russia.

For the first years of the Civil war, Ernst's experiences were less direct and more directorial. Singer's New York executives, recognizing that the Civil war had divided their Russian market, placed Ernst in independent control of the Siberian Singer operations in December 1918. Through the U.S.-controlled port at Vladivostok, Ernst travelled to the United States to meet personally with the Singer Manufacturing Company executives and prepare a course of action for Singer's Siberian network. While a visit to the United States from European Russia at this time would have been nearly impossible, the situation in the Russian east made travel feasible. Officially divorced from Myslik's authority and Kompaniya Singer's Moscow headquarters, Ernst's Siberian territory was placed under the direct authority of the New York

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<sup>176</sup> Affidavit of Voldemar Wilhelm Ernst, July 5, 1923, 461.11 Si 6, *Records of the Department of State Relating to U.S. Claims Against Russia, 1910-1929* (National Archives Microfilm Publication T640, roll 8), RG 59, NACP.

headquarters.<sup>177</sup> Shipments of machines, needles, and other necessary equipment began to flow from North America to Vladivostok.<sup>178</sup>

This is not to say that the repercussions of the revolution and civil war were minimal in Siberia. On the contrary, Ernst fielded requests and reports from the Urals to Vladivostok which documented local shops' lack of supplies and lack of security. Ernst's own experiences confirmed the hardships of war. Like Singer managers throughout Russia, he was confronted by employee uprisings. Employees returning to the Far East from the War demanded larger payments than Ernst and Singer were prepared to give.<sup>179</sup> The money with which Ernst paid his employees and maintained Singer's business was rapidly depreciating. In 1919, Ernst bought a building in Irkutsk on Singer's behalf in the hope that real estate would hold its value better than cash.<sup>180</sup> Once the political situation stabilized, he hoped to sell the building and reclaim the company's money. The desired stability would never come in the form Ernst imagined, however. As one of his Irkutsk employees recalled, Ernst was forced by "the political conditions and the fighting" to abandon both his investment and the city of Irkutsk.<sup>181</sup> Moving to Chita and eventually Vladivostok, Ernst managed Singer's business in eastern Russia from within the country until March 1923. In 1923, Ernst left for Harbin.<sup>182</sup>

While Ernst's ability to stay in Russia four years longer than Myslik owes much to his remote location, it also owes a great deal to powerful connections. As a multinational

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<sup>177</sup> Affidavit of Otto Myslik, September 8, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Report on Protection and Assistance Given Singer Sewing Machine Company, April 29, 1918, Box 4: 1918 Files: 320-610, Folder 350 [1 of 2] (Box 4, Folder 350 [1 of 2]), United States Consular Records for Moscow, Russia, 1857-1935 (Moscow Consulate), Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, 1788-ca. 1991, Record Group 84 (RG 84), NACP.

<sup>180</sup> European Trip – Russia – 1919, box 155, folder 10, Singer Mss.

<sup>181</sup> Affidavit of Eduard Reson, August 18, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.

<sup>182</sup> Affidavit of Voldemar Wilhelm Ernst, July 5, 1923, 461.11 Si 6, *Records of the Department of State Relating to U.S. Claims Against Russia, 1910-1929* (National Archives Microfilm Publication T640, roll 8), RG 59, NACP.

corporation, the Singer Manufacturing Company could provide entry to powerful professional networks. As an American company, Singer provided a connection to the U.S. government.

The Singer Manufacturing Company had long called on American representatives within Russia to protect its business. As discussed in the previous chapter, the U.S. State Department was active in fighting against the sequestration of Kompaniya Singer's shops during World War I. Following the Russian Revolution, the State Department and especially the American consuls in Russia became an essential partner in Singer's communication and the protection of its assets.

The directors of Kompaniya Singer and the Singer Manufacturing Company trusted the American State Department as an effective medium to communicate quickly and securely. Before leaving Russia, Otto Myslik exchanged telegrams with Singer Manufacturing Company President Douglas Alexander via the American Consul and State Department.<sup>183</sup> When he had to leave Moscow, Myslik left many of the Company's books, receipts, and documents with the consul for safe keeping.<sup>184</sup> Once he arrived in Constantinople, Myslik continued to communicate with the Singer leadership through the State Department's networks, even using this means of communication to facilitate in-person meetings with Singer's New York leadership.<sup>185</sup>

In the Far East, the U.S. State Department and consuls played an especially important security and assistance role for Ernst. From early in the Civil war, Ernst called upon the American Consul in Irkutsk. In 1918, when veterans returning to Singer's employment in Irkutsk demanded larger payment from the company, Ernst appealed to the American Consul. The employees, reported Ernst, had pledged to "seize by force the General office and the local store of the company, drive out the management and do as they might see fit with the proper [sic]

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<sup>183</sup> For example, see Douglas Alexander to Lansing, February 28, 1918, Micro 2013, Reel 58, Singer Mss.

<sup>184</sup> Secretary to Secretary of State, April 28, 1920, Micro 2013, Reel 59, Singer Mss.

<sup>185</sup> Letter to Singer Manufacturing Company, March 18, 1919, 012/24848, Box 646: Simpson, Thacher & Bartlett (July 1929 to Sinnott, N.J., Name Index, 1910-44, 1910-1929, Central Index Decimal File, RG 59, NACP.



of the company.”<sup>186</sup> In order to protect Singer’s interests, the American Consul urged Ernst to “temporarily” close the Singer offices in Irkutsk. The consulate worked to prevent Ernst’s arrest and took temporary possession of Singer’s safe and building keys.<sup>187</sup> After the mitigation of this crisis, the consulate continued to aid Ernst. In 1919, the U.S. State Department ferried communication and funds between Ernst and Singer’s New York headquarters.<sup>188</sup> When Ernst permanently left Russian territory in 1923, he left Singer’s Vladivostok assets “under seal” of the U.S. Consulate, which continued to advocate for Singer’s interests in the city.<sup>189</sup>

To Singer managers like Ernst, the U.S. State Department was a safe and dependable business ally. As conditions in Russia became more and more unstable, Singer employees called upon the State Department for assistance and in order to document their hardships for future use. The affidavits collected by Singer and which form the bulk of the source material for this chapter were sent to the State Department for just such a documentary purpose. For official representatives of Singer, the State Department fulfilled an important commercial purpose.

Beyond such official uses, however, the State Department became a useful resource for the personal needs of Kompaniya Singer’s employees. When it became necessary for Ernst to leave Irkutsk, the American Consul helped him get out of the city.<sup>190</sup> Walter Dixon, once he had left Russia, called upon the U.S. State Department to ferry information about his sister-in-law and her family in Moscow to him in America.<sup>191</sup> In Omsk, the American Consul helped Ivan Nicolaievitch Mowtschanow to reclaim Singer’s shops, but also to avoid arrest. When it came

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<sup>186</sup> Report on Protection and Assistance Given Singer Sewing Machine Company, April 29, 1918, Box 4, Folder 350 [1 of 2], Moscow Consulate, RG 84, NACP.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Communication from Singer Manufacturing Company, April 12, 1919, April 29, 1919, 012.2-Singer Mfg. Co., Box 646, Central Index Decimal File, RG 59, NACP.

<sup>189</sup> Affidavit of Voldemar Wilhelm Ernst, July 5, 1923, 461.11 Si 6, *Records of the Department of State Relating to U.S. Claims Against Russia, 1910-1929* (National Archives Microfilm Publication T640, roll 8), RG 59, NACP.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Letter from Secretary to Secretary of State, April 27, 1918, Micro 2013, Reel 58, Singer Mss.

time to give his affidavit, Mowtschanow remembered the consulate's help with great affection and credited the staff for his safety, saying "Although twelve years have passed I still remember with thanks the attempts of Messrs. Thompson and Gray to facilitate the task given me by the Management and to protect me from the power of the Confiscators."<sup>192</sup>

For these employees, the U.S. State Department provided invaluable assistance in securing their safety and even their passage out of war zones. With the exception of Dixon, however, none of these men were American citizens.<sup>193</sup> Their connection to the resources of the U.S. State Department came solely through their association with the Singer Manufacturing Company. By staying closely tied to Singer's multinational enterprise, Ernst, Mowtschanow, and others gained access to foreign institutions to which they would have been unable to appeal independently. Whether these international security networks motivated men like Ernst to stay connected to Singer is impossible to say. Nonetheless, for the employees that made use of these connections, Kompaniya Singer provided entry into useful international networks. As the situation in Russia became more dangerous, such networks and support systems became more important. For Singer's managerial employees and others in a position to trade on Singer's name, the company's powerful foreign allies could become valuable personal allies.

### **Wartime Internees in the Urals: Adolf Harich**

Up to this point, the individuals highlighted have experienced the revolution and Civil war as employees of Kompaniya Singer. Within the affidavits, however, is a significant population of past Singer employees. Although these men (they are all men), had worked for Singer's Russian business in the past, they were no longer employed by Singer in 1917. Subjects

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<sup>192</sup> Affidavit of Ivan Nicolaievitch Mowtschanow, September 16, 1930, box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss.

<sup>193</sup> For more on Dixon and his citizenship, see Domosh, "American Capitalist Experiments," 43-53.

of Russia's World War I enemies or ethnic Germans, these sixteen past Singer employees had been interned in the Russian interior during World War I.

This internment took many different forms. Nearly all the internees were imprisoned for at least a few weeks, but most were not incarcerated long. After initial arrests, they lived in relative freedom in the Ural regions of Ufa and Orenburg.<sup>194</sup> Some men continued to work during internment. Many moved, or were moved, throughout the Urals or Siberia during the war years. Most, however, were separated from Singer's enterprise.

At the same time that Bolshevik policies were being implemented in Moscow, the Civil war was reaching the Urals. The revolutions and Civil war disrupted the imperial internment system, and many of the employees chronicled in the affidavits attempted to make their way to Germany or the newly independent Baltic states. These men had been sent to the Urals precisely because of the mountains' distance from the Germanic lands, however. The trip to Europe was a long and arduous one.

Adolf Harich was one of these internees. Born in Freudenthal, Silesia, Harich was an Austrian subject.<sup>195</sup> A few months before the outbreak of the First World War, Harich accepted a position as a clerk in Kompaniya Singer's Moscow offices. About a week after the war began in the summer of 1914, Harich was ordered to report to the Russian military authorities. After being held in the barracks for about two weeks, Harich and his co-worker Kuno Ganzel, were sent to Orenberg. The following spring, Harich was moved to a different town within the Orenburg region.<sup>196</sup> As a prisoner, Harich was barred from employment and dependent on financial aid from his former employer. With the October Revolution, however, this aid

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<sup>194</sup> Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire*, 155. According to Lohr, most internees, excluding men of military age, were allowed to live in freedom in their place of internment.

<sup>195</sup> Affidavit of Adolf Harich, August 25, 1930, box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss.

<sup>196</sup> Affidavit of Adolf Harich, August 11, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.

ended.<sup>197</sup> Around the same time, Harich began working for the Danish Embassy in Orenburg. His supervisor was responsible for “looking after” Austro-Hungarian prisoners in Russian internment, and Harich helped in this work.<sup>198</sup>

In Orenburg, Harich found himself in the midst of the fighting between the Czech legion, Admiral Kolchak’s White troops, and the Red Army. Harich’s Danish boss and Harich himself were caught up in the fighting. Although Harich does not explain the circumstances, his supervisor was arrested and killed by Czech troops in August 1918.<sup>199</sup> Harich was also arrested, sent to Samara, and eventually acquitted by a Czech court martial at Ekaterinburg.<sup>200</sup> After his acquittal, Harich was moved to Chelyabinsk and another village occupied by White troops. In March 1919, he resumed his work with the Danes, only for it to be finally ended by the Bolshevik conquest of Chelyabinsk in July.<sup>201</sup> In September 1919, Harich was arrested by the Bolsheviks. He was sent to Ufa and later imprisoned in Moscow. On February 16, 1921, he was released and allowed to leave Russia. Harich returned to Czechoslovakia before settling in Vienna with a new position in one of Singer’s Viennese shops.<sup>202</sup>

When Harich returned to work with Singer in 1921, it had been seven years since he had last worked for the company. Although he had received financial aid from Kompaniya Singer into 1917, he had only worked for the company for one year before his internment. Perhaps he had worked for Singer in his homeland before coming to Russia, but if that was the case, he never mentions it. The new position he acquired after leaving Russia, assistant manager of a shop, was quite different from his Moscow job as a headquarters clerk. How, after so many

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<sup>197</sup> Affidavit of Adolf Harich, August 25, 1930, box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss.

<sup>198</sup> Affidavit of Adolf Harich, August 11, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

years, did Harich find himself once again working—in an entirely new capacity—for the same, old company?

While the answer is no doubt complex, one component is simple. Harich, like so many other Singer employees interned during the First World War, had never cut his ties to his former employer. Like the employees that remained in Petrograd and Moscow, many interned employees received practical aid from Singer during their internment. In his affidavit, Harich explains that, until the October Revolution, he had been “dependent for the necessities of life upon assistance which was paid to me by Kompaniya Singer.”<sup>203</sup> Much like the free Singer employees, the interned employees benefitted materially from their association with Singer.

While this material aid helped to connect Harich and his fellow internees to Singer, it ended in October 1917. After that time, there were very few material benefits Singer could provide in the short term. Despite this fact, many of the interned employees kept tabs on Singer. In their affidavits, many interned employees were able to recount stories of Singer’s activities in the Ural cities, although most of them never worked in that region. Arno Hunger, for instance, who had managed Singer’s Baku central agency before the War, knew of the confiscation of Singer’s Baku goods. Although Hunger returned to Baku after his internment, he never again worked for Singer in the city.<sup>204</sup> Likewise, Harich reports in his affidavit that many of the Singer shops in the Ural towns he visited were open into 1919.<sup>205</sup> As the purpose of the affidavits was to chart the demise of Kompaniya Singer, it makes perfect sense that Hunger, Harich, and others comment on the state of the enterprise. During the Civil war, however, Harich and Hunger were not thinking about their future affidavits. Rather, they must have had other reasons for keeping abreast of Singer’s affairs.

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<sup>203</sup> Affidavit of Adolf Harich, August 25, 1930, box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss.

<sup>204</sup> Affidavit of Arno Hunger, August 25, 1930, box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss.

<sup>205</sup> Affidavit of Adolf Harich, August 11, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.

The tie of Singer employees like Harich and Hunger to the corporation is not nearly as straightforward as the ties that connected Myslik, Fridlender, Ernst, or Owczarski to Singer. Unlike these earlier examples, the internees were no longer employed by Singer. Like them, however, the internees were outsiders. As white-collar workers, they were not likely to gain acceptance from the revolutionary working class. As Germans or enemy subjects, they were suspect in their Russian environment. Their connection to the company may have been motivated more by the need for connection, community, and assistance, than by material reward or loyalty to Singer.

In many ways, Singer provided a network and community for its internee employees. Whether German, Austrian, or Russian subjects before World War I, the internees shared an ethnically Germanic background. Ethnic Germans were overrepresented in the Imperial Russian elite and, as was discussed in the previous chapter, within *Kompaniya Singer*. Within the affidavit set, however, the representation of ethnic Germans is even less proportional. Despite Singer's desire to use local staff, twelve of the affidavit writers identified themselves as German subjects or ethnic Germans; an additional two were German citizens by 1930. Another ten were born or claimed citizenship in the Baltic states, while there was one Austrian and one Volga German in the group. Many of those with Latvian and Estonian citizenship were likely ethnic Germans. In fact, four of the affidavit subjects that styled themselves as from Latvia or Estonia were among the internees.

That so many of these ethnically German employees were included in the affidavit set suggests a strong ethnically German social or support network within *Kompaniya Singer*. In his book *The Jewish Century*, Yuri Slezkine argues that the Jews of the nineteenth and twentieth century, often outcasts from their surrounding societies, built mobile communities and networks

of their own.<sup>206</sup> Benjamin Sawyer suggests that this same “Mercurian” model of connectedness and mobility was a trademark of Kompaniya Singer’s German employees.<sup>207</sup> Outside of the mainstream of Russian society, the German employees were tied together along ethnic lines. The hub of that connection was their workplace, Kompaniya Singer.

It was through Kompaniya Singer that these German workers came into contact with one another, and sustaining a connection to Singer was a way to maintain these interpersonal and professional connections. Several of the employees, especially those who had been interned during the war, called on their former colleagues before leaving Russia. Friedrich Bäumlér, a German-born Singer employee who had worked in St. Petersburg, Orel, Archangelsk, Odessa, and Kozlov before being arrested in 1918, was one such employee. When he was released in June 1918, Bäumlér travelled through Moscow to return to Germany. In Moscow, he stopped in the Singer offices to see Otto Myslik.<sup>208</sup> Similarly, Podolsk employee Max Creutzburg visited his old factory and spoke with a former coworker after his release from internment in Orenburg. During their conversation he ascertained how much things had changed, and he left for Germany soon after.<sup>209</sup>

Even when there was no one left to visit, many employees made pilgrimages to their former workplaces. In 1920, for instance, former Singer Central Agency Manager Armin Coldewey visited the Moscow and Petrograd offices of Kompaniya Singer on his way to Germany. When he arrived at the Singer Building on Petrograd’s Nevsky Prospect, by that time already turned into a bookstore, he was stopped by soldiers and told “that there was nothing there

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<sup>206</sup> Slezkine, *Jewish Century*, 24-25.

<sup>207</sup> Sawyer, “Manufacturing Germans,” 20.

<sup>208</sup> Affidavit of Friedrich Bäumlér, August 11, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.

<sup>209</sup> Affidavit of Max Creutzburg, September 10, 1930, box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss.; Affidavit of Max Creutzburg, August 12, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.

and that [he] should leave.”<sup>210</sup> In one sense, these visits may have been a form of disaster tourism—a chance to see what had become of once treasured locations. This explanation does not seem wholly satisfying. The employees did not go simply to observe, but to attempt to connect for business and personal reward. Coldewey was not content to wait outside, but tried to enter.

Even for those employees that did not seek out their old colleagues or workplaces, the chance encounters with past or present Singer employees were noted. While imprisoned in Moscow, Harich met Jan Myslik, brother of Kompaniya Singer director Otto Myslik, who informed Harich of Singer’s nationalization. Whether Harich knew Jan Myslik before the war is unclear. Their time in Singer’s Moscow office did not overlap. They were both from the Czech regions of the Austrian Empire and they had both worked for Singer, however. This tie to Singer was an essential part of their tie to one another.

In these visits to individuals and locations, the professional and personal “Mercurian” network is the draw. Singer’s interned employees, like other members of “Mercurian” networks, belonged to a modern mobile workforce. They were not tied to the land or a particular locale. For Singer’s “Mercurian” employees, the First World War and Russian Revolutions upset any grounding they may have attained within Russian culture. All that remained in the face of this upheaval was their mobility and their network of fellow travelers. Singer, which had directed the employees’ mobility and facilitated their “Mercurian” network, became a dependable resource. For foreigners within Russia, for whom state and class loyalties were not available resources, the company was a lifeline. Singer provided a wide-reaching network of similar colleagues. It was Singer that had brought them together, and it was through Singer that they remained a community.

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<sup>210</sup> Affidavit of Armin Coldewey, August 15, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.



## Rethinking Company Men

Singer's fostering of a "Mercurian" community, its offering of future employment and powerful contacts, and its ability to supply immediate necessities made the company a valuable partner for its employees. Through their relationships with Singer, the employees profiled in this chapter personally benefited. Owczarski received social standing in Podolsk and a job in his native Poland. Myslik and Dixon gained material wealth and high-ranking employment. Fridlender had access to bartering goods at a time when even the bare necessities were difficult to attain. Ernst had a connection to the U.S. government, which protected his interests and his life. Harich and the other internees were entered into a "Mercurian" community of support and comradery. These were only some of the benefits felt by the employees. Fridlender wrote to Myslik in the years after leaving Russia and also benefitted from a "Mercurian" community. Like Owczarski, Myslik, Dixon, and Ernst all took new positions with Singer. In similar ways, the other affidavit subjects gained through their relationships with the company. These employees were not simply cogs in the wheel of the company. Rather, they intentionally mobilized and manipulated their employer's resources for their own well-being. They used Singer as a tool for securing their material and personal security. This agency on the part of Kompaniya Singer's employees complicates the picture of modern company men.

Although these employees fit the white-collar mold of the Cold War-era "organization men," they were not simply submissive company men. They could not be. Ordinary corporate institutions were turned on their heads by the Bolshevik's militantly anti-capitalist agenda, and the circumstances of the war and revolution made it impossible to advance to a comfortable retirement solely by climbing the corporate ladder. While Cold War-era company men achieved bureaucratic mundanity through association with their employers, Singer's employees needed

and sought a much more dynamic and risky relationship to their company. Choosing to associate with one of the bulwarks of modern capitalism during an anti-capitalist revolution was certainly a risk, as to which tales of imprisonment and suspicion like Owczarski's testify. Yet, many employees believed that they stood to gain more from their relationship with Singer than they stood to lose.

Part of this belief came from their ability to retain personal autonomy. Autonomy within the context of a larger corporate culture was a hallmark of Singer's corporate strategy. Given the difficulty of long distance communication within Russia, local managers had long been trusted to act in the best interest of the company.<sup>211</sup> As communication with Moscow and New York grew increasingly difficult during the war and revolution, local managers and even clerks were left to their own devices. As Singer's Russian managerial hierarchy fell apart, these local authorities operated more and more independently.

This individual autonomy within the corporate structure is included within some conceptions of early company men. One suggested embodiment of this autonomous company man was the railroad stationmaster. In contrast to "organization men," railroad stationmasters had a level of autonomy and real authority. Geographically removed from the railroad headquarters, they ruled over their own affairs. While bound to the standing orders of their superiors, they were expected to use their own resourcefulness and best judgement to run their

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<sup>211</sup> This is not to say that Kompaniya Singer lacked a strong hierarchy. On the contrary, historians have reflected on the strength of Singer's organizational system, particularly its uniformity of sales policies and layers of administrative oversight. Individual salesmen managed their own accounts, however. Carstensen estimated that "more than half of all [Kompaniya Singer] agents worked semiautonomously." Moreover, despite the efforts of Kompaniya Singer's leadership to travel to the various regions of the empire, Kompaniya Singer remained a vast enterprise that depended on the efforts and adjustments of on-the-ground depot and agency leaders. For more on Singer's uniformity of policies, see Andrew Godley, "Selling the Sewing Machine around the World: Singer's International Marketing Strategies, 1850-1920," *Enterprise & Society* 7, no. 2 (2006): 292-296. For more on Kompaniya Singer's sales structure, see Carstensen, *American Enterprise in Foreign Markets*, 60-67.

stations.<sup>212</sup> In many ways, the Kompaniya Singer network of sales divisions and depots was analogous, even in its terminology, to the railroad. While railroad executives could always hop on the next train to correct their stationmaster subordinates, however, this direct executive control became functionally impossible in revolutionary Russia. As Ernst was formally separated from Myslik's authority due to the impossibility of communication, lower-level employees experienced informal autonomy. Even without this threat of managerial correction looming over them, the Singer employees in these affidavits often acted in Singer's best interest. Given such substantial autonomy, why did they not abandon their employer's interests in favor of their own?

Fundamentally, this question masks a faulty assumption. In many cases, the affidavit writers never had to consider abandoning Singer's interests for their personal interests, because the two were often the same. The Kompaniya Singer employees whose stories are told in these affidavits would not have made good Bolsheviks. As white-collar workers, they were predisposed to be against the October Revolution and they were seen as adversaries by emerging workers' groups. As ethnic foreigners, they were further separated from the Russian population. Had they desired to be accepted in the emerging Soviet system, these employees would have had difficulty. These employees were not simply corporate stooges or turncoats. They did not fit in the class or ethnic groups favored by the Bolsheviks, and they did not see anything to be gained from the revolution. Rather, for Singer's affidavit writers, the instability of revolutionary Russia only compounded the instability brought on by World War I. Singer's Russian and international leadership saw the Revolution in the same way.

As a multinational and capitalist organization, Singer became, for its employees, a useful resource in these uncertain times. Thanks to its massive size and resources, Singer was able to

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<sup>212</sup> Sampson, *Company Man*, 24-25.

provide its employees with immediate aid, useful connections, and the promise of future stability. Opposition to bolshevism may have played a role in sustaining Kompaniya Singer's company men, but it was the benefits the affidavit writers gleaned from their association with Singer that solidified the relationship.

Beyond help securing the necessities of daily life, the most important benefits that the Singer Manufacturing Company gave to its employees were stable and valuable connections. While the ground was shifting below Russian society, the multinational nature of the Singer Manufacturing Company gave it a rare stability. Kompaniya Singer was unable to weather the Russian Civil war, but its parent company remained removed from the violence and turmoil of revolutionary Russia. While Russian institutions were disappearing or fundamentally changing, Kompaniya Singer employees could realistically hope that Singer would remain a viable organization and that its networks of assistance might continue.

For "Mercurians" like the affidavit writers, the promise of future jobs and powerful friends outside of Russia likely resonated even more strongly than they would have for more locally rooted Russian residents. Many of Singer's affidavit writers were foreign-born or members of ethnic minorities. Their careers, often with Singer, had required mobility and adaptation in the past. As a result, they may have been more open to and prepared for seeking opportunities outside of Russia. Singer had much to offer employees with these transnational and cosmopolitan perspectives.

Singer's multinational character, therefore, was essential to its relationship to Kompaniya Singer's company men. The company provided its company men with tangible benefits and stability that was due in large part to its multinational status. A smaller, Russian corporation would not have been able to supply the same resources to its employees. While corporations

without a multinational structure may have been able to provide their employees with immediate aid and material goods in the short term, they could not have provided comparable stability or the promise of long-term security.

Among businesses, only a vast multinational enterprise like Singer could become a foil to the rising totalitarianism of Soviet Russia. Only a transnational organization or international association could offer relative stability as Russian society became increasingly chaotic. For Kompaniya Singer employees who rejected or were rejected by the Soviet system, Singer became a resource. Embracing a position as a Singer company man did not represent, as did the Cold War “organization man,” unthinking allegiance to a possibly malevolent company. On the contrary, Kompaniya Singer company men used their employer’s strength and resources to further their own well-being.

## Chapter 4

### A Company and Community in Exile

On December 21, 1921, Douglas Alexander, President of the Singer Manufacturing Company, wrote to Otto Myslik about Podolsk factory employee Kazimierz Owczarski. Alexander endorsed Myslik's quest to find a new job for Owczarski within the Singer organization. Owczarski had only recently left Soviet Russia, and Alexander was interested in reading the former Podolsk department manager's assessment of the nationalized factory's "manufacturing conditions." Alexander believed that finding a spot for Owczarski within Singer's enterprise would "certainly be to our advantage."<sup>213</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, Singer had a great deal to offer to Owczarski and other Kompaniya Singer employees faced with the Revolution, but what did these employees have to offer to the company? Why was the continued employment of this midlevel Russian factory manager an advantage to Singer?

A crucial part of the answer to this question centers on Singer's expectation of a return to its Russian business. For much of the 1920s, Alexander, Myslik, and the rest of the Singer leadership expected the demise of Bolshevik Russia. When Soviet power fell, the Singer executives planned to reenter the Russian market, reclaim their property, and continue to build Kompaniya Singer. In order to be prepared for the coming resurrection of their Russian company, the leadership of the multinational corporation kept alive the idea and community of Kompaniya Singer. The Singer Manufacturing Company actively fostered Kompaniya Singer as a company and community in exile.

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<sup>213</sup> Alexander to Myslik, December 21, 1921, Micro 2013, Reel 60, Singer Mss. In this letter, Owczarski's name is spelled with a transliteration of its Russian spelling "Ovcharsky."

This chapter will consider Kompaniya Singer's existence as a company in exile during the 1920s. Within the context of the historiographies of both the revolutionary Russian emigrant communities and the emergence of trade between the West and the early Soviet Union, this chapter explores the importance to Singer's business interests of supporting its Russian employees and keeping them connected to the multinational company. The first half of this chapter focuses on the Singer leadership's intended return to the Russian market during the Civil war and the employees' preparations for this return. When the Russian market did not immediately reopen, Singer's expectations and business plans evolved. As it became less likely that the parent company would need Kompaniya Singer's employees to return to Russia, it explored trade with Soviet Russia and integrated Kompaniya Singer's employees into other markets. Although many former Kompaniya Singer employees continued to work for Singer, as time progressed they became more connected to Singer's multinational enterprise than to the former Russian company.

### **Kompaniya Singer as a Company in Exile**

During the Russian Civil War, the Kompaniya Singer employees that fled Russia were part of a mass exodus. Somewhere between one and three million refugees found their way out of the former Russian Empire in the first years following the Russian Revolution.<sup>214</sup> Like many of the Kompaniya Singer employees profiled in the previous chapter, these Russian refugees settled in European capitals and the Far East. In these disparate locales, Russian refugees envisioned themselves as part of an alternate Russia, or a Russia Abroad.

Historians have long considered the political and literary legacy of Russia Abroad, but the social and cultural history of this diaspora (if, in fact, diaspora is the right word) has only

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<sup>214</sup> Estimates vary considerably. For discussions of the number of Russian refugees, see Michael R. Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 61; Claudena M. Skran, *Refugees in Inter-War Europe: The Emergence of a Regime* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 33.

been assessed over the last few decades.<sup>215</sup> Building on early works devoted to the Russian communities in Paris and Berlin, Marc Raeff reoriented the study of Russia Abroad by defining the phenomenon as a “society in exile.”<sup>216</sup> To Raeff, Russia Abroad was not a collection of geographically disparate emigrant communities, but a unified society complete with varying social classes, ethnic groups, and political allegiances. Raeff contended that Russia Abroad was not merely the transplanted aristocracy or liberal intelligentsia.<sup>217</sup> Russia Abroad was diverse. In many ways, it sought to be and was a cultural continuation of the Russian Empire that Singer had entered in the nineteenth century. Whether the active members of Russia Abroad were truly as diverse as the intellectual, cultural, and political leaders of the movement supposed is debatable. As Rogers Brubaker has suggested about diaspora studies, it could be that many refugees from the Russian Empire were assigned by intellectuals and historians to a community that they did not actively embrace. Still, the image of a united cultural foil to the Soviet Union persisted in Russia Abroad. Like the *Kompaniya Singer* leadership and affidavit writers, the leaders of Russia Abroad set themselves apart from and in opposition to Bolshevik Russia.

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<sup>215</sup> There have been many studies in the last thirty years addressing the cultural and social history of the Russian emigration in the interwar period. For an early history, see Marc Raeff, *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3-5. For recent monographs expanding on Raeff's thesis, see Paul Robinson, *The White Army in Exile, 1920-1941* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) and Greta N. Slobin, *Russians Abroad: Literary and Cultural Politics of Diaspora (1919-1939)* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013). There is also wide literature on the Russian emigrant community within specific countries. One of the earlier examples is Robert Johnson, *New Mecca, New Babylon: Paris and the Russian Exiles, 1920-1945* (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), while more recent examples include Elena Chinyeva, *Russians Outside Russia: The Émigré Community in Czechoslovakia 1918-1938* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2001) and Catherine Andreyev and Ivan Savicky, *Russia Abroad: Prague and the Russian Diaspora, 1918-1938* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). For further discussions of the historiography of Russia Abroad, see Zoia S. Bocharova, “Contemporary Historiography on the Russian Émigré Community in the 1920s and the 1930s,” *Russian Studies in History* 41, no. 1 (2002): 66-91 and Marc Raeff, “Recent Perspectives on the History of the Russian Emigration (1920-1940),” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6, no. 2 (2005): 319-334.

Rogers Brubaker and others have argued that a diaspora should remain for multiple generations. Whether Russia Abroad met this qualification is debatable. For a discussion of the definitions of “diaspora,” see Rogers Brubaker, “The ‘Diaspora’ Diaspora,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 1 (2005): 1-19.

<sup>216</sup> Raeff, *Russia Abroad*, 3-5.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.



Many Russian refugees and many Kompaniya Singer employees shared a sense of exile during the 1920s. To Raeff and his followers, this exile implied the temporary nature of Russia Abroad. Members of Russia Abroad believed that they would return to Russia on their own terms, and therefore they did not seek to integrate into their host countries or compromise with Soviet Russia. Russia Abroad was set in opposition to Soviet Russia, and its members anticipated the speedy failure of the Soviet experiment. When (not if) this failure came, Russia Abroad would be prepared to return and lead Russia.<sup>218</sup> The leaders of Kompaniya Singer had the same expectation of Soviet failure and a similar desire to return to Russia.

Given these similarities, it is tempting to consider Kompaniya Singer as part of Russia Abroad. In some ways, it was. Kompaniya Singer was chartered as an Imperial Russian institution, and many of the company's employees were certainly refugees fleeing the Revolution. As a subsidiary of a multinational corporation, however, Kompaniya Singer's Russian identity was always problematic. Scholars of Russia Abroad discuss their subjects firmly within a Russian national context, and Singer's transnational business model makes it a poor fit for such a discussion. Similarly, while Raeff and his fellows argue for the ethnic and cultural diversity of Russia Abroad, they assume the exiles were Russian citizens or subjects. Many displaced Kompaniya Singer employees were not legally Russian. They had migrated to Russia for work, and after the Revolution they left. As discussed in the chapter on the First World War, Singer's multinational business model created a leadership class in Kompaniya Singer that was cosmopolitan. Although Singer executives argued for the Russianness of their corporation during World War I, the company remained a fundamentally multinational entity. The prime objective of the leadership of Kompaniya Singer was not the maintenance of Russian culture or politics. Their chief concern was to find a way to sell sewing machines within Russia, a desire

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

that could lead Singer toward collaboration with non-Russian groups or even with the Soviet Union.

Given the multinational and profit-driven nature of Singer, this chapter does not argue for Kompaniya Singer's inclusion in Russia Abroad. Rather, this chapter suggests that in parallel to this "society in exile," Kompaniya Singer became a company in exile. In the same way that Russian political emigrants believed they would return to direct Russian affairs and the White Army prepared for an opportunity to defeat the Bolsheviks, so the Singer Sewing Machine Company anticipated its reentry into Russia.

### **Early Singer Exiles: Walter Dixon and the Fight for Podolsk**

Almost as soon as Kompaniya Singer's leaders left Russia, they began working towards their return. Walter Dixon, the director of Singer's Podolsk factory, was immediately put to work petitioning the U.S. State Department on Singer's behalf. As an American citizen with first-hand experience in Russia, Dixon was an obvious choice for this role. For years before leaving Russia, Dixon had been the bridge between Kompaniya Singer and the U.S. State Department. Once he returned to the United States, Dixon continued to use his State Department connections in defense of and advocacy for Kompaniya Singer. The American Consul in Moscow, Maddin Summers, who called Dixon his "personal friend," arranged Dixon's first meeting with Washington-based State Department officials.<sup>219</sup> On January 15, 1918, Dixon met with these officials to explain Singer's interests in Russia, and he returned to Washington for a second meeting a month later.<sup>220</sup> In one respect these meetings are merely a continuation of an ongoing conversation between Singer and Secretary Lansing's State Department.

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<sup>219</sup> Maddin Summers to Frank L. Polk, November 2, 1917, 861.00/634 1/2, *Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1910-1929* (National Archives Microfilm Publication M316, roll 10, frame 559), RG 59, NACP.

<sup>220</sup> Alexander to Lansing, January 24, 1918, Micro 2013, Reel 57, Singer Mss.

At the same time, Dixon's January 1918 meeting is an early example of Kompaniya Singer in exile. Dixon had been forced to flee from Russia and his portion of the Russian company, the Podolsk factory, was already in many practical ways outside of Singer's control. Kompaniya Singer's Russian sales operations continued to function, but the company's ownership of the Podolsk factory was little more than nominal. As discussed in the previous chapter, Otto Myslik had negotiated a lease with the Bolshevik authorities to ensure Singer ownership of the factory through September 1918. By the end of the lease period, however, the Soviet authorities were in firm control of the factory. For all practical purposes, Dixon's departure had marked the end of Singer's control in Podolsk. Despite this apparent loss of the factory, Dixon was continuing to petition the State Department for Podolsk's benefit. While Dixon's earlier conversations with the U.S. State Department had been based on the hope of continuing Singer's operations in Podolsk, he now turned to the State Department for help in reinstating himself and Singer in Podolsk. Dixon was functioning as an employee of Kompaniya Singer, yet he was already himself in exile. By continuing to petition the State Department for aid in Russia, Dixon and Singer were operating under the assumption they would one day return to reclaim their property in Podolsk. They were treating the factory, as they were Dixon, as a part of Kompaniya Singer that was temporarily out of commission. Dixon and Podolsk were early aspects of Kompaniya Singer's company in exile.

Dixon and the Singer leadership saw both the Podolsk factory's loss and Dixon's departure from Russia as temporary. Dixon's wife was ethnically Russian, and several of their family members remained in Russia during the Civil war. In April 1918, the Secretary of the Singer Manufacturing Company, inquiring through the State Department into the welfare of Dixon's Russian family, described Dixon as "a Director of our Subsidiary Russian Company

who left Russian temporarily last November.”<sup>221</sup> As late as 1921 letter to Douglas Alexander, Dixon signed his name over his position as a director of the Russian Company.<sup>222</sup> Singer’s use of such qualifiers and titles, even if they remained technically true, reveal an underlying presumption of Kompaniya Singer’s continued existence as a company in exile. Rather than a returning American, Dixon was styled as a visitor who would soon be returning to his post in Russia.

Concurrent with his labelling as a visitor, however, Dixon began to be grounded more firmly in the American Singer operations. Dixon was given a new position as Work Manager at Singer’s factory in Elizabethport, New Jersey. Alongside this new position, however, he continued to be an ambassador for Kompaniya Singer. Dixon again met with U.S. State Department officials again in 1918, and Singer once again requested a meeting between Dixon and American officials in April 1922. Dixon’s on-the-ground experience in Russia was unique in Singer’s American leadership, and this experience helps to explain his continued connection to discussions of Russia. When Douglas Alexander received new information on the situation in Russia or on Singer’s Russian interests, he often forwarded this material to Dixon. While Dixon’s experience added perspective and context to Alexander’s understanding of these new developments, this communication also served to keep Dixon actively involved in the company in exile. Through these updates, Dixon was kept current with the operations of the erstwhile Kompaniya Singer. This information was more than just of academic interest. Dixon needed to be kept up-to-date with the situation in Russia, if he were to one-day return.

#### **At the Center of the Company in Exile: Otto Myslik**

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<sup>221</sup> Singer to Secretary of State, April 27, 1918, Micro 2013, Reel 58, Singer Mss.

<sup>222</sup> Dixon to Alexander, February 2, 1921, box 155, folder 6, Singer Mss.

The Russian communications that Alexander forwarded to Dixon came through Otto Myslik. Myslik had been in charge of Kompaniya Singer's sales operations, and after the Revolution he became the linchpin in the communication of the company in exile. Myslik received and initiated communication with both his former employers and the Singer Manufacturing Company executive leadership. While some of this communication was certainly fueled by Myslik's personal and "Mercurian" relationships with his employees, as explored in the previous chapter, this communication also reflected a change in Myslik's job description.

After leaving Russia for Constantinople, Myslik arrived in Paris by December 1919.<sup>223</sup> Once in Western Europe, Myslik's role with Singer expanded beyond the Russian company. Along with a Mr. Adcock, another Singer employee, Myslik took on the "general direction and supervision of the work of reconstruction of the business in the countries which have been so much devastated by the war."<sup>224</sup> Myslik's new responsibilities covered territory from Egypt to Amsterdam, in addition to the Baltic states and Poland.<sup>225</sup> These disparate locations and the upheaval of war required Myslik to travel extensively in 1920, to the point that Douglas Alexander apologized for the inconvenience.<sup>226</sup>

Despite these new responsibilities, Kompaniya Singer and the state of affairs in Russia continued to require Myslik's attention and his time. In Douglas Alexander's letters to Myslik, Russia features prominently. Alexander wrote 58 letters to Myslik between December 1919 and February 1921. Over twenty of these letters included mention of Kompaniya Singer, Soviet Russia, or newly independent regions once connected to Kompaniya Singer's sales network. The following year, the numbers were comparable. Unfortunately, Myslik's responses are not

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<sup>223</sup> Alexander to Myslik, December 30, 1919, Micro 2013, Reel 59, Singer Mss.

<sup>224</sup> Alexander to Ehram, December 15, 1920, Micro 2013, Reel 59, Singer Mss.

<sup>225</sup> Alexander to Myslik, August 18, 1920, Alexander to Myslik, January 27, 1920, Alexander to Myslik, February 6, 1920, Micro 2013, Reel 59, Singer Mss.

<sup>226</sup> Alexander to Myslik, September 14, 1920, Micro 2013, Reel 59, Singer Mss.

extant. Through Alexander's side of the conversation, however, it is possible to reconstruct a likely explanation of both men's understanding of and hope for the Russian situation.

In 1919 and 1920, Alexander's letters seem less than optimistic about the situation in Russia. While confiding to Myslik at the end of 1919 that he had great hope for the improvement of world affairs in the coming year, Alexander bemoaned the fact that "[f]or the moment it is true the Russian situation seems to be quite hopeless."<sup>227</sup> Even within this pessimism, however, is buried a token of optimism about the eventual return to Russia. Alexander writes that the ongoing White Russian retreats in Ukraine "justify [Singer's] decision not to do anything more in that country than to attempt to maintain the nucleus of an organization."<sup>228</sup> Despite the dismal and seemingly hopeless situation in Russia, Alexander does not suggest that Singer abandon the Russian market completely. Although Dixon and Myslik had already been forced to leave the country, Alexander saw the presence of sales staff, albeit a small "nucleus" of its former self, to be justifiable in Russia. This staff would be the foundation for Kompaniya Singer's return to Russia.

After the departure of Dixon and Myslik, how was Singer to maintain this "nucleus" of a staff? Although the exact methods of the maintenance varied over time and space, Singer initially depended on the existing business infrastructure of the company to maintain contact with its employees. Although Dixon and Myslik were no longer located in Russia, Myslik was able to retain indirect control of the former Kompaniya Singer through Mr. Schick, the head of the Extraordinary Committee of the Highest Economical Council of the People (also referred to as the Extraordinary Commission of the Supreme Council of National Economy), which had been appointed to oversee Singer's property. Schick was a friend of Kompaniya Singer and

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<sup>227</sup> Alexander to Myslik, December 30, 1919, Micro 2013, Reel 59, Singer Mss.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

Singer employees stressed in their affidavits that Schick acted in Singer's best interest.<sup>229</sup> Myslik placed great faith in the Extraordinary Commission and by extension Schick. In a letter to Alexander in March 1919, Myslik explained the Extraordinary Committee's success in fighting against taxes imposed on the Podolsk factory by the Podolsk Soviet. Myslik concluded that he had "every reason to believe the Extraordinary Commission will work also further on these lines to save the factory as well as business organisation [*sic*] from ruin."<sup>230</sup> Although the situation was far from ideal, Myslik believed that Schick and the Extraordinary Committee could maintain Singer's assets, including its employee "nucleus."

What Myslik did not yet realize when he wrote to Alexander in March 1919, was that the Extraordinary Committee had been officially replaced by direct Soviet management of Singer's assets in January 1919. Despite this change, however, Schick remained the dominant force in the new management.<sup>231</sup> Likely with Schick's knowledge, Myslik was regularly informed of the company's affairs and remained able to direct Singer's affairs and its employees from Constantinople until the end of 1919.<sup>232</sup> Although Myslik was officially disassociated from the company, in practice the employees continued to report to Myslik through Schick.

In November 1919, however, Schick died.<sup>233</sup> The loss of Schick was a blow to Myslik and the Singer leadership. Schick had been a respected and known entity, whom Myslik trusted to keep *Kompaniya Singer* intact. Schick had been amenable to the interests of Singer, but his replacement, a Mr. Revidzoff, was not. Revidzoff, unlike Schick, was a true Bolshevik, and his rise to the top of the former *Kompaniya Singer* hastened the "full application of Bolshevik

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<sup>229</sup> Affidavit of Emil L. Fridlender, August 16, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.; Affidavit of Otto Myslik, September 8, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.

<sup>230</sup> Otto Myslik to Douglas Alexander, March 22, 1919, box 157, folder 4, Singer Mss.

<sup>231</sup> Affidavit of Otto Myslik, September 8, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.* Also see the correspondence, including updates on the company, received by Myslik in Constantinople in 1919, box 157, folder 4, Singer Mss.

<sup>233</sup> Affidavit of Emil L. Fridlender, August 16, 1921, box 155, folder 2, Singer Mss.

theories to the Singer Company.”<sup>234</sup> Without a friendly executive atop the remnants of Kompaniya Singer within Russia, Myslik was increasingly removed from the daily operations of Kompaniya Singer. Schick’s death and the further unwinding of affairs at Kompaniya Singer’s Moscow headquarters may have fueled Douglas Alexander’s pessimism about the future of Kompaniya Singer at the end of 1919.

Despite this turn of affairs, Alexander and Myslik retained a modicum of hope in the midst of their hopelessness, especially in their discussion of the Siberian Singer shops. Although Myslik had been controlling the Siberian shops as part of Kompaniya Singer, it was clear by the middle of 1920 that this situation would not be sustainable. European Russia was controlled by the Bolshevik forces, while anti-Bolshevik powers had their strongholds in the east. As discussed in the previous chapter, Voldemar Ernst was given the power of attorney to separate Singer’s Siberian infrastructure from the remnant of Kompaniya Singer. In one sense, this separation was Singer’s acceptance of the loss of its business in European Russia. Communication and managerial networks between Moscow, Paris, and New York had been greatly damaged, and the only way to oversee and protect the Siberian business was to tie it directly to New York. In such a scenario, it would seem logical to free the Siberian business from formal subordination to Kompaniya Singer as soon as possible.

Alexander and Myslik, however, followed a different course. In August 1920, Alexander urged Myslik to postpone the separation of the Siberian business from Kompaniya Singer for as long as possible. Alexander hoped that a delay in separation would allow for more definite geographic boundaries to be established between Siberia and Western Russia.<sup>235</sup> Both Myslik and Alexander envisioned a definitive division between the two territories. Without this vision,

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Alexander to Myslik, August 18, 1920, Micro 2013, Reel 59, Singer Mss.



it would have been moot to discuss the establishment of a distinctly Siberian Singer network. To Alexander, however, this separation had the possibility to be a lasting one with well-defined international borders. A non-Soviet Russia, perhaps co-existing with a Soviet Russia, seemed a distinct possibility and served as a hope for Alexander's conception of his company's Russian interests. In contradiction, Alexander's hesitation to separate the Siberian business from Kompaniya Singer left open the hope for a speedy reunification of Russia under conditions favorable to Singer's business. Although Alexander does not mention this possibility, a swift victory of the White Armies would have made the separation of Singer's European and Siberian business unnecessary. In either scenario, the continuation of Singer's Russian business was assumed. The exact form of this business was unclear, but Alexander and Myslik expected to retain at least portions of Kompaniya Singer's organization and market.

In order to retain and regain this market, Myslik and Alexander needed to maintain Kompaniya Singer's labor force. Historians, including Robert Davies and Andrew Godley, have stressed the role of Singer's innovative sales and customer support networks in the company's global success.<sup>236</sup> Singer's widespread national networks of retail shops required a large, dependable employee base, and qualified employees had been difficult to find in Russia.<sup>237</sup> The lack of suitably trained Russian employees led Kompaniya Singer to hire many foreign managers and ethnic minorities, as discussed in an earlier chapter. After the Revolutions, the skilled employees which Kompaniya Singer had worked hard to identify and train were dispersed throughout the world. In order to be prepared to reenter Russia, Singer needed to retain its valuable human capital—what Alexander repeatedly called a “nucleus of an organization.”

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<sup>236</sup> Davies, *Peacefully Working to Conquer the World*, 335-336; Godley, “Selling the Sewing Machine around the World,” 270.

<sup>237</sup> See Carlsensen, *American Enterprise in Foreign Markets*, 79-81.

Maintenance of this workforce in exile fell to Myslik. As the former head of Kompaniya Singer's sales organization, Myslik was well-known to the employees and he became the recipient of many appeals for help. Many Kompaniya Singer employees, and even their family members, wrote to Myslik for a variety of different types of aid. Some, like former Moscow bookkeeper Emil Fridlender, asked for jobs outside of Russia.<sup>238</sup> Other employees asked for money to help in their adjustment to exile or to reimburse their expenses in leaving Russia.<sup>239</sup> Myslik and Alexander granted many of the employees' requests. In September 1921, Alexander gave Myslik \$10,000 to use as he saw fit in the aid of Kompaniya Singer employees, both inside and outside of Russia. Alexander suggested that Myslik keep secret this fund, but that he use it and his efforts to "maintain for Russia both inside and out the nucleus of an organization upon which we shall be able to successfully build when conditions become such as to make it possible for us to seriously undertake it."<sup>240</sup> To the Singer leadership, the financial support of Kompaniya Singer's employees in exile and those confronting the Civil war within Russia was an investment in the future of Singer's Russian business.

In addition to financial assistance, this investment in the future of Kompaniya Singer also necessitated actively sustaining personal relationships and communication between the Kompaniya Singer leadership, embodied by Myslik, and the former employees. In August 1921, Myslik, joined by Walter Dixon, met with groups of Kompaniya Singer employees in Berlin.<sup>241</sup> While the meetings allowed Singer to compile affidavits for its eventual legal cases against the Bolsheviks, these conferences also renewed face-to-face the relationships between Singer and its

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<sup>238</sup> Friedlender to Myslik, September 29, 1920, box 157, folder 5, Singer Mss.

<sup>239</sup> See for instance Finkel to Myslik, January 21, 1922, box 157, folder 5, Singer Mss. and Bark to Myslik, n.d., box 157, folder 5, Singer Mss.

<sup>240</sup> Alexander to Myslik, September 6, 1921, Micro 2013, Reel 60, Singer Mss.

<sup>241</sup> Alexander to Myslik, August 1, 1921, Micro 2013, Reel 60, Singer Mss.; Alexander to Myslik, August 22, 1921, Micro 2013, Reel 60, Singer Mss.

employees. Responding to the concerns of the Kompaniya Singer employees, Myslik cabled Alexander to institute severance pay for those employees for whom “suitable positions” could not be found outside of Russia. It may be that Singer could not integrate such a mass of extra employees into its European networks, much as the interwar economies of European nations could not adequately employ the emigrants of Russia Abroad. It is also possible that not all of these employees were part of the Kompaniya Singer “nucleus” that Alexander and Myslik deemed necessary for rebuilding their Russian operation. One group that did seem to be part of that “nucleus” was the trusted employees remaining in Russia.

In the same telegram in which he outlined his plan for pay to the company’s unemployed former workers, Myslik confided to Alexander that money must be set aside “for the purpose of supplies food stuffs [*sic*] as soon as possible to employees in Russia all of which must be encouraged in every way to remain.”<sup>242</sup> Alexander concurred, writing plainly a year later that the Singer should “keep such experienced employees whose loyalty is unquestioned available in Russia...for starting up our work there again when the proper time arrives....”<sup>243</sup> Trusted employees remaining in Russia, which became an increasingly small group as the 1920s progressed, were a valuable link between the company in exile and its property and operations in Russia. These employees knew both the Singer organization and the ways in which that organization had been reorganized and amended by the nationalizing authorities. In order to restart their business efficiently, the Singer executives would need this information. Accordingly, keeping such employees loyal and in Russia was important for keeping tabs on the former Kompaniya Singer.

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<sup>242</sup> Alexander to Myslik, August 22, 1921, Micro 2013, Reel 60, Singer Mss.

<sup>243</sup> Alexander to Myslik, September 30, 1922, Micro 2013, Reel 61, Singer Mss.

Myslik continued to do what was possible to aid the company's employees remaining in Russia, though there was often little that could be done to keep such employees in their posts. The story of Myslik's own brother, Jan, is a prime example. Jan Myslik had been employed by Kompaniya Singer as a Central Agency Manager at Saratov before the Revolutions. In 1918, the leadership of the nationalized Singer company appointed him to oversee two combined central agencies in Moscow. Two years later, Jan Myslik was arrested by Soviet authorities, but after 103 days he was released and allowed to return to his work.<sup>244</sup> With his personal connections to the Singer leadership, Jan Myslik was the sort of loyal employee that the Singer executives sought to retain. Douglas Alexander specifically mentioned Jan Myslik in a letter to his brother Otto in 1922, suggesting that Myslik be sure his brother received aid from the company.<sup>245</sup> Given their familial connection, it is likely that Otto Myslik did his best to ensure such aid reached Jan. Despite these efforts, however, Jan Myslik left Moscow for Prague in late 1922.<sup>246</sup> He had been fired by the Bolshevik authorities on suspicion of funneling information to Singer.<sup>247</sup>

Whether or not Jan Myslik gave information to Kompaniya Singer while working for its Bolshevik successor (and it seems likely he did), the suspicion was well founded. Other Kompaniya Singer employees had done so. One employee, a Mr. Bertrow, explained to Otto Myslik via letter in 1923 that the authorities' suspicions regarding his correspondence had caused him to limit it for some time. Through a hand delivered letter, however, Bertrow was eager to once again communicate with Myslik.<sup>248</sup> While letters could sometimes be passed, as Bertrow did, to travelers leaving Russia, this system was not always dependable.<sup>249</sup> Border

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<sup>244</sup> Affidavit of Jan Myslik, August 21, 1930, box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss.

<sup>245</sup> Alexander to Myslik, September 30, 1922, Micro 2013, Reel 61, Singer Mss.

<sup>246</sup> Affidavit of Jan Myslik, August 21, 1930, box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss.

<sup>247</sup> Business in Soviet Russia, European Trip – Russia – 1922, Document No. 20, box 155, folder 10, Singer Mss.

<sup>248</sup> Bertrow to Myslik, October 28, 1923, box 157, folder 10, Singer Mss.

<sup>249</sup> For an example of letters sent via a traveler, see translation of letter from Br. Tenndorf, n.d, box 158, folder 4, Singer Mss.

control officials prevented many emigrants from taking any documentation out of Russia. While some things could be hidden, many Singer employees were forced to leave all of their papers behind.

Trusted employees remaining in Russia were an essential source of information for the company in exile, but employees that had just emigrated were also important informers. Recognizing the value and depth of information held by such employees, Singer used forms in 1921 and 1922 to standardize the collection of written accounts from such employees. Several pages in length, these forms included a wide variety of questions, depending on the experience of the employee. Owczarski, who worked at Podolsk, was asked twenty-four questions, ranging from the composition of the factory management to the factory working hours to the general situation in the town.<sup>250</sup> Even the most basic information was valuable to Singer executives planning a return to Russia. Copies of Owczarski's detailed report were forwarded by Myslik to Alexander, and from Alexander to Dixon.<sup>251</sup> Once *Kompaniya Singer* was once again controlling Podolsk, all three men would need to be ready to respond to the situations Owczarski described.

Myslik was the clearinghouse for *Kompaniya Singer* information. Taking letters from Alexander on one side and destitute *Kompaniya Singer* employees on the other, Myslik spread information and aid between the management and the workers. By doing so, he kept alive the company in exile. As time wore on, however, there was less new information to disseminate. Fewer loyal employees remained in Russia. A 1923 list of "former employees in Russia" listed only nineteen current employees of *Glavschveimachin*, some of whom were only assumed to be working for the company. While Singer likely had other contacts not included on this list—the

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<sup>250</sup> "Polozhenie na Zavode v Podolsk," December 27, 1921, box 158, folder 4, Singer Mss.

<sup>251</sup> Alexander to Myslik, January 11, 1922, Micro 2013, Reel 60; Alexander to Dixon, January 11, 1922, Micro 2013, Reel 60, Singer Mss.

list was compiled by the former company's cashier in Moscow, and includes primarily Moscow employees—it is important to note the relative obscurity of many of these employees. While the Moscow cashier, bookkeeper, and a few shop managers are mentioned, the list consists primarily of office clerks. Those Kompaniya Singer employees in higher positions had, like Jan Myslik, recently been forced out of the former Kompaniya Singer management. Others had left the country. Although the records do not say so explicitly, it seems likely that additional employees found their connection to Singer to be too great a liability, as Bertrow had implied, and ceased communication. As time wore on, Douglas Alexander's "nucleus" of employees within Russia was eroding.

When the Red Army established control over the far reaches of Russian territory, the immediate resurrection of Kompaniya Singer changed from a realistic scenario to an increasingly improbable dream. Voldemar Ernst, the head of Singer's Siberian business, left for Harbin in 1923. In late 1923, Singer's Georgian business was nationalized by the Soviets. The Singer Manufacturing Company no longer had any direct control over the shops and possessions of its Russian subsidiary. Without a foothold remaining in Russia, the perspective of Singer executives toward the reemergence of their business changed. While Alexander had held out great hope for the Georgian business in 1922, its confiscation in September 1923 came as no surprise. With palpable resignation, Alexander wrote Myslik that he had "no expectation that any other result was possible in view of the general situation."<sup>252</sup> The writing was on the wall for Kompaniya Singer, and Alexander believed that little could be done to help those employees remaining in Soviet lands. Acknowledging to Myslik the lamentable situation of Singer's manager in Tiflis, Alexander concluded that he was but "one of many" whom Singer could not

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<sup>252</sup> Alexander to Myslik, September 17, 1923, Micro 2013, Reel 62, Singer Mss.

help.<sup>253</sup> By late in 1923, Kompaniya Singer's business had crumbled and so had the employee "nucleus" within Russia. Singer executives did not entirely abandon the hope of reclaiming their Russian business, nor did they completely abandon their attempts to aid former employees. Reading the signs of the times, however, the Singer executives began to seriously consider other ways of selling sewing machines in the Soviet Union.

### **Considering Trade with the Soviet Union: The International Harvester Model**

The possibility of selling sewing machines and parts to the Soviet government was not a new idea for Singer or other multinational companies. As early as the summer of 1919, Myslik was entertaining the possibility of importing goods into Soviet Russia.<sup>254</sup> Although Alexander was firmly opposed to the early discussions of trade with the Soviet authorities, many Western businesses pursued relationships with the Soviet authorities. International Harvester was one of these companies. In the mid-1920s, as Singer executives began to accept the improbability of reclaiming their property within Russia, they began to consider aspects of the International Harvester model.

International Harvester's Russian business had much in common with Kompaniya Singer. The two companies were the largest and most successful American businesses in Russia prior to the First World War, and they have often been compared to each other.<sup>255</sup> Like Singer, International Harvester operated a factory in Russia and employed a retail sales force across the empire.<sup>256</sup> Although the machines International Harvester and Singer manufactured were quite

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Proposed Corporation for Import and Export of Goods for Russia, European Trip – Russia – 1919, Document No. 18, box 155, folder 10, Singer Mss.

<sup>255</sup> See Carstensen, *American Enterprise*; Mona Domosh, *American Commodities in an Age of Empire American Commodities in an Age of Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Floyd James Fithian, "Soviet-American Economic Relations, 1918-1933: American Business in Russia during the Period of Nonrecognition," Ph.D. diss., University of Nebraska, 1964; Thomas J. O'Neill, "Business, Investment and Revolution in Russia: Case Studies of American Companies, 1880s-1920s," Ph.D. thesis, McGill University, 1987.

<sup>256</sup> Carstensen, *American Enterprise in Foreign Markets*, 193, 207-208.

different, there were many parallels between the companies' Russian organizations. Thanks to these similarities, Singer could have chosen to follow International Harvester's path during and after the Russian Revolution.

There were also key differences between Singer and International Harvester, however, that help to explain why Singer did not follow International Harvester's path. Agricultural machinery was more important to the developing Soviet state than were sewing machines. While Singer's Podolsk factory had been converted to wartime production, International Harvester's factory continued to manufacture agricultural machinery. The Soviet agricultural officials placed orders with International Harvester.<sup>257</sup> Through the help of American Red Cross representative and de facto diplomat Raymond Robins, International Harvester avoided the nationalization of its factory.<sup>258</sup>

Although International Harvester continued to operate its factory until the middle of 1923, production was difficult. The factory operated at a loss after 1914.<sup>259</sup> From 1922, the Soviet authorities wanted International Harvester to update its production facilities and increase its production. Unwilling to implement such expensive improvements or to operate its factory as a Soviet concession, International Harvester eased production in May 1923.<sup>260</sup> In September 1924, the factory was officially nationalized by the Soviet authorities.<sup>261</sup>

While nationalization of its factories and retail shops had ended Singer's sales in Russia, International Harvester continued to invest in the Russian market. As early as April 1920, International Harvester began selling American-produced machinery to Soviet buyers.

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<sup>257</sup> Katherine A.S. Siegel, *Loans and Legitimacy: The Evolution of Soviet-American Relations, 1919-1933* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 113.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>260</sup> Fithian, "Soviet-American Economic Relations," 26.

<sup>261</sup> Siegel, *Loans and Legitimacy*, 117.



International Harvester was approached by Selskosoyus, one of the Soviet purchasing agencies exporting American goods to Russia, even before the United States had officially opened trade with the Soviet Union.<sup>262</sup> In 1921, when America allowed free trade with the Soviet Union, International Harvester sold \$1.5 million worth of goods to its Russian partners.<sup>263</sup> Although American businesses were initially hesitant to conduct business with Soviet Russia, these hesitations diminished as the Soviet companies met their financial obligations.<sup>264</sup> In 1924, International Harvester became one of the first American companies to extend credit to Soviet buyers.<sup>265</sup> The sales of International Harvester and its competitors made the Soviet Union the recipient of a quarter of American tractor exports between 1925 and 1929.<sup>266</sup>

After 1917, International Harvester's approach to the Russian market was very different from Singer's. Not without reason, historians like Floyd James Fithian have used the stories of International Harvester and Singer to demonstrate the two extremes of post-Revolution engagement with the Soviet market by firms active in pre-Revolutionary Russia. Fithian concludes that while Singer "departed from the Russian scene and did not reappear in any significant way" before American recognition of the Soviet Union, International Harvester "was never very far from the Russian market."<sup>267</sup> Fithian is right, of course, that International Harvester was far more involved in Soviet Russia than was Singer, but Singer's limited involvement in Soviet Russia was not a foregone conclusion. Rather, the decision to avoid trade with the Soviet government was a decision that had to be made by Myslik and Alexander over and over again in the early 1920s. The stability of Russia as a trading partner and the definitive

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<sup>262</sup> Fithian, "Soviet-American Economic Relations," 28; White, 196.

<sup>263</sup> Christine A. White, *British and American Commercial Relations with Soviet Russia, 1918-1924* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), 222.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>265</sup> Siegel, *Loans and Legitimacy*, 100.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>267</sup> Fithian, "Soviet-American Economic Relations," 36.

loss of Kompaniya Singer's foothold in Russia in 1923 made trade with Russia an increasingly plausible option.

### **Selling to the Soviets**

Since leaving Russia, Singer had had a standing policy of not trading with Soviet Russia. Douglas Alexander often reiterated to Otto Myslik Singer's opposition to trade with Russia.<sup>268</sup> New opportunities for such trade appeared often. In March 1921, for instance, Singer's New York offices were approached by a representative of what Alexander called the "Co-operative Society of Russia." This businessman presented a purchase list of desired Singer goods, both machines and parts. Identical lists were given to Singer's representatives in Paris, Berlin, and Stockholm.<sup>269</sup> At about the same time, another Singer employee brought to Alexander and Myslik's attention a possibility for doing business in Soviet Russia.<sup>270</sup> In both instances, Alexander and Myslik turned down the possibility of trade with Russia. The company's position was not to enter into business with the Soviet government until the situation of its confiscated property had been resolved.

Although this general policy remained, it weakened by the middle of the decade. In 1924, if not before, Singer began selling a limited number of machines to the All Russian Cooperative Society, known as Arcos.<sup>271</sup> A British company registered in 1920, Arcos received sums of gold from the Soviet authorities to purchase needed goods abroad.<sup>272</sup> In 1923, an American branch of Arcos, later to be enfolded into Amtorg, was incorporated in the United

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<sup>268</sup> See for instance Proposals Made by Soviet Government, European Trip – Russia – 1920, Document No. 18, box 155, folder 10, Singer Mss; Alexander to Myslik, August 18, 1920, Micro 2013, Reel 59, Singer Mss.; September 14, 1920, Micro 2013, Reel 59, Singer Mss.; Alexander to Myslik, March 4, 1921, Micro 2013, Reel 60, Singer Mss.

<sup>269</sup> Alexander to Myslik, March 4, 1921, Micro 2013, Reel 60.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> Alexander to Myslik, June 10, 1924, Micro 2013, Reel 62, Singer Mss.

<sup>272</sup> Merle Luber Friedenberg, "Prelude to Autarky: Soviet Economic Diplomacy and the Failure of Integration into the European Economic System, 1920-1928," Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1991, 24; White, *British and American Commercial Relations*, 165.

States.<sup>273</sup> By selling machines to Arcos, Singer was changing its earlier policy of non-engagement with the Soviet authorities. Singer had not been compensated for its property or reinstated in its Russian business, yet the company had tentatively embarked on a new method of selling its goods in Russia.

This method was tentative, because the sales to Arcos were not a complete break with Singer's earlier policy. While other American and British companies offered credit to the Soviet trade companies, Singer worked strictly on a cash basis.<sup>274</sup> Singer continued to offer cash sales to Arcos and other Soviet agencies in following years, though credit was denied even to former employees of the company.<sup>275</sup> The Singer executives maintained that unless the Soviet government were to "change their policy and discuss the settlement of former engagements...they [would] not be able to obtain the Capital which they need to keep their industries going..."<sup>276</sup> Myslik and Alexander still held out hope that the Soviet authorities would resolve their "former engagement," but they were not opposed to small sales in the meantime. These small sales helped to keep the Singer's products in the mind of Russian consumers.

In quantities and influence, these small sales were certainly no replacement for Singer's pre-Revolutionary Russian infrastructure and autonomy. Although Singer was able to enter the Soviet market in a small way, it was not able to reconstitute *Kompaniya Singer*. Even as they pursued these exchanges with Soviet trading agencies, Singer leaders envisioned a Soviet import scheme that would be led by *Kompaniya Singer*'s foreign employees. In 1926, Myslik wrote to several former *Kompaniya Singer* employees to discuss the possibility of establishing former employees within the Soviet Union as private traders. These trusted employees would import

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<sup>273</sup> Fithian, "Soviet-American Economic Relations," 120.

<sup>274</sup> White, *British and American Commercial Relations*, 197; Alexander to Myslik, June 10, 1924, Micro 2013, Reel 62, Singer Mss.

<sup>275</sup> Alexander to Myslik, June 10, 1924, Micro 2013, Reel 62, Singer Mss.

<sup>276</sup> *Business with Soviet Russia, European Trip – Russia – 1925*, Document No. 21, box 155, folder 10, Singer Mss.

and sell Singer goods, in competition with the state-run trading agencies.<sup>277</sup> The records are incomplete, but it seems unlikely that anything ever came of this plan.

Although Singer did not establish large-scale trade with the Soviet Union in the same way that International Harvester and other Western firms did, the possibility of such trade gave direction to the company in exile. Plans like the 1926 possibility of establishing former *Kompaniya Singer* employees as independent traders revealed the importance of continuing to foster the remnants of Alexander's organizational "nucleus" within Russia. In the aid of these Russian contacts, Myslik continued to draw on the \$10,000 aid fund set up in 1921. By November 1927, the company had given away \$6,136.31.<sup>278</sup> Understood as aid by the recipients, this money served as an investment for Singer. If the company were ever to resume the sale of sewing machines in Russia, it would need trusted, Soviet contacts.

During the New Economic Policy (NEP), the possibility of trade with the Soviet Union seemed possible. After the nationalizations of the Civil war period, the possibility of privately owned business which grew from the NEP policies gave many foreign investors and companies the impetus to invest in and trade with the Soviet Union.<sup>279</sup> Companies whose assets or businesses had been nationalized after the October Revolution, however, were cautious in their involvement with the Soviet Union.<sup>280</sup> For Singer, any large-scale trade could only come with

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<sup>277</sup> Translation of letter from H. Herdt, Kovno to Myslik, March 5, 1926, European Trip – Russia – 1926, Document No. 22, box 155, folder 10, Singer Mss.

<sup>278</sup> Russian Relief Fund, European Trip – Russia – 1927, Document No. 23, box 155, folder 10, Singer Mss.

<sup>279</sup> For discussions of American and British trade with Russia during NEP, see Christine A. White, *British and American Commercial Relations with Soviet Russia, 1918-1924* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992); Andrew J. Williams, *Trading with the Bolsheviks: The Politics of East-West Trade, 1920-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992); and Roger Munting, "British Business and the Politics of Trade with the USSR during the New Economic Policy (NEP)," *Business History* 48, no. 2 (2006): 254-271. For a recent examination of American economic migrants to the Soviet Union during NEP, see Benjamin Warren Sawyer, "American 'Know-How' on the Soviet Frontier: Soviet Institutions and American Immigration to the Soviet Union in the Era of the New Economic Policy" (PhD diss., Michigan State University, 2013).

<sup>280</sup> Fithian, "Soviet-American Economic Relations," 36-38.

compensation for its confiscated property.<sup>281</sup> Singer's executives held out hope for this compensation. NEP had signaled a substantial change from the Soviets' earlier economic policy. If the policies and approaches of the Soviets could change enough to allow NEP, perhaps they could evolve to compensate companies for the property they had nationalized. At least as long as NEP endured, the hope of expanded trade with the Soviet Union remained.

While employees within Russia remained an important commodity, employees outside of Russia had evolved from a distinct Russian labor force to a network of consultants. Many of Singer's former employees had been incorporated into Singer's other European or American businesses. The affidavits of Kompaniya Singer employees taken in 1930 reflect this integration of Kompaniya Singer employees. Fifteen of the nineteen identified affidavit writers mention current jobs with Singer.<sup>282</sup> The company in exile had become a communication network that could be called upon for advice or assistance. The creation of the 1930 affidavits themselves speak to the importance of such a network. On a daily basis, however, the Kompaniya Singer employees had been assimilated into Singer's other branches. They were settled into new homes and new careers. The possibility of returning to Russia, which had been so likely in the early 1920s, was very remote by 1930.

### **Kompaniya Singer, the Company in Exile, and Company Men**

Throughout the 1920s, Singer's perspective on the future of its Russian business shifted drastically. In the early 1920s, Singer Manufacturing Company executives expected an

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<sup>281</sup> Douglas Alexander frequently reiterated this point in his correspondence with Otto Myslik. For examples, see Proposals Made by Soviet Government, European Trip – Russia – 1920, Document No. 23, box 155, folder 10, Singer Mss.; Alexander to Myslik, March 4, 1921, Micro 2013, Reel 60, Singer Mss.; Alexander to Myslik, January 19, 1923, Micro 2013, Reel 61, Singer Mss. The need to tie compensation to a US-Soviet trade agreement was also stressed by Singer in its correspondence with U.S. governmental officials. For examples, see Singer Manufacturing Company to Secretary of State, March 17, 1920, Micro 2013, Reel 59, Singer Mss.; Secretary to Herbert Hoover, April 10, 1922, Micro 2013, Reel 60, Singer Mss.

<sup>282</sup> See affidavits in box 155, folder 3, Singer Mss. and 461.11 Si 6, *Records of the Department of State Relating to U.S. Claims Against Russia, 1910-1929* (National Archives Microfilm Publication T640, roll 8), RG 59, NACP.

imminent return to Russia, but by 1923 and 1924 the reemergence of Kompaniya Singer was moving from improbable to impossible. Over the course of these changes, the maintenance of Kompaniya Singer's information networks and the retention of its former employees were reiterated time and again as important goals by Singer's leadership. To Alexander and Myslik, Kompaniya Singer employees evolved from the "nucleus of an organization" necessary for the resurrection of Kompaniya Singer's manufacturing and retail operations to key sources of trusted information and finally to a network of occasional consultants. Despite this evolution, however, the Singer leadership continued to invest in and support its former Russian employees. These employees, whose knowledge of Singer's Russian affairs was coupled with a record of loyalty and trustworthiness, were not interchangeable cogs in the machine of the Singer Manufacturing Company. They were a rare and valuable commodity—the sort of company men worthy of investment.

Singer's investment in these employees and their individual value further complicates standard and dismissive understandings of company men. In Whyte's portrait, organization men were similarly educated, similarly trained, and generally exchangeable in the eyes of their employer. While it was necessary, for instance, for DuPont to have engineers, it did not greatly matter whether it had this particular engineer. The uniformity of employees meant that employers could rely on characteristics of groups instead of characteristics of individuals. Singer's investment in and reliance on its Kompaniya Singer employees, however, reveals a different corporate view of employees. Once Kompaniya Singer became a company in exile, these employees were valued for their personal experience and knowledge of Russia and their demonstrated reliability. These traits could not be easily duplicated. To Myslik and Alexander, the Kompaniya Singer employees that made up the "nucleus" of the Russian company were

individually important. This individual value and autonomy necessitated a more personal relationship between the company and its company men. Rather than simply needing employees, Singer needed these employees. Because there were so few of them, the employees were important to the company not just as types, but as individuals.

This is not to say that every Kompaniya Singer employee was viewed individually by the Singer leadership. On the contrary, Singer often lumped together its Russian employees. Alexander, removed from the Russian operations, referred only to an impersonal “nucleus of an organization,” not to individual employees. It is likely that he had not met or heard of many employees beyond Myslik, Dixon, and Ernst. Otto Myslik, as the link between the Singer leadership and the Kompaniya Singer employees, however, had a different perspective. He fostered communication with employees that he trusted and allocated money to employees he deemed sufficiently needy and worthy. Through Myslik, the company invested in its employees as individuals.

During the turmoil and uncertainty of the Civil war, Singer was a lifeline to many of its displaced or disenfranchised employees, but the employees were simultaneously a lifeline for Singer’s hope of a future business in Russia. The Singer executives and Kompaniya Singer employees shared a symbiotic relationship in which both stood to gain. In the shifting sands of the post-revolution era, this employer-employee relationship was not remote or formulaic. Rather, it became an increasingly personal relationship of trust and improvisation. Within the context of the multinational Singer corporation, executives and their employees built relationships buoyed by their common values, cooperative experiences, and reciprocal needs. From Kompaniya Singer to the company in exile and beyond, these men and women had forged a community.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

Before the First World War, Kompaniya Singer was one of the Singer Manufacturing Company's most significant and most successful national subsidiaries. Singer's New York leadership had high hopes for the Russian market, and it realized these hopes through Kompaniya Singer's vast retail network, Podolsk factory, and palatial Nevsky Prospect headquarters. By 1930, however, Singer's hopes had evaporated. Kompaniya Singer's retail shops had been shuttered or nationalized, its factory had become a Soviet operation, and its former headquarters building was Soviet Petrograd's House of Books (*Dom Knigi*). The Singer globe remained as a beacon over the new *Dom Knigi*, but the events of the previous fifteen years had shown the limits of the global enterprise it had been erected to symbolize.

As a multinational company with transnational ambitions and cosmopolitan management, Singer was ill equipped to adjust to the rise of nationalistic policies and local political changes. To the increasingly suspicious and nationally-minded imperial government, Kompaniya Singer's foreign ties were liabilities. To the rising Soviet government, Kompaniya Singer's place within global capitalism was likewise problematic. In both instances, the points of contention between company and government went to the root of Kompaniya Singer's *raison d'être*. Singer was at its core a multinational company with the ambition of selling sewing machines around the globe, what one London-based Singer employee described as "peacefully working to conquer the world."<sup>283</sup> Although the company could attempt to adapt to the expanding ethnic nationalism of the late Russian Empire, its endeavors were fundamentally limited. Similarly, while Singer's executives could entertain the notion of selling machines and parts to the Soviet government,

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<sup>283</sup> "Report on the Proceedings on the Occasion of Breaking Ground for the Singer Manufacturing Company's New Factory (at Kilbowie, near Glasgow, Scotland," May 18, 1882, p. 22, quoted in Godley, "Selling the Sewing Machine around the World," 270.



their company's capitalist essence and goals and the Soviet government's socialist goals made further assimilation impossible.

While Singer's multinational nature became an insurmountable hurdle for the company's business in Russia, it was simultaneously an important factor in tying Kompaniya Singer's affidavit writers to the company. Singer's transnational business networks became a source of stability amid the turmoil of the First World War and Russian Civil War. The demise of Kompaniya Singer was a substantial loss for the Singer Manufacturing Company, but the rest of the company's commercial empire continued. This continuity, even amid adversity, became an asset for the Kompaniya Singer employees positioned or motivated to tap into Singer's multinational networks. For its managerial and cosmopolitan employees, especially its foreign and ethnically non-Russian company men, identification with Singer had the potential to bring immediate and future benefits. Singer's transnational and supranational structure was fluid and adaptable to the turmoil of the Russian Revolution and Civil War. This adaptability made Singer's network a valuable connection and source of aid for its similarly adaptable and cosmopolitan employees. During the turbulent period from 1914 to 1930, this institutional identity provided useful resources and security for many of Singer's company men. For these cosmopolitan company men, Singer became a network that reached beyond business objectives into the realm of personal welfare.

### **Conceptualizing an End**

Part of the difficulty in telling a story that blurs the lines between business and personal experience is defining a beginning and, especially in Kompaniya Singer's case, an end. The demise of Kompaniya Singer's network and the end of its employees' identification with the company were gradual and evolutionary processes. There are many different end points that

could be placed on Singer's Russian story. No single event signaled the end of the Russian company or the communication and social network it sustained within the Russian lands, the company in exile, or among former employees. The end came early for line workers at Podolsk, but much later for Otto Myslik. For Myslik and the Singer leadership, the dream of reconstituting Kompaniya Singer or reemerging within the Russian market persisted for many years after the last Singer shops in Russia had been nationalized. These different endings give different meanings to different employees' identification with Singer.

Chronologically, Kompaniya Singer's first ending date is 1917. The Russian Revolution, especially the October Revolution, brought substantial change to the country and substantial uncertainty to Singer's business. Some Kompaniya Singer employees welcomed this change. In the early 1930s, American writer Myra Page visited Podolsk and described the revolutionary fervor of workers who had once labored under Singer's leadership. Page explains the years that two employees, Feodor Trefanov and Andree Budnikov, spent working to bring about political change in Podolsk and how, at news of the October Revolution they joined with others to take over the Podolsk factory and "tossed [their] old cap[s], whooping, high in the air."<sup>284</sup> Pages' book, published by a Soviet firm in the days of Stalinism, should not necessarily be taken at face value, yet the fact remains that for Singer and all of Russian society the October Revolution signaled a break from the status quo, even if that break was often more evolutionary than instantaneous.<sup>285</sup>

The Singer Manufacturing Company itself recognized this break when it needed to ascribe an end to Kompaniya Singer. In 1956, Singer's New York management filed a claim

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<sup>284</sup> Page, *Soviet Main Street*, 27.

<sup>285</sup> Through a biographer, Page explains that, while she may not have known everything occurring in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, she wrote from experience. She says, "I wrote what I observed. Whether you call it art or whether you call it truth, I thought it ought to be on the record." Christina Looper Baker, *In a Generous Spirit: A First-Person Biography of Myra Page* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 125-126.

with the United States Foreign Claims Settlement Commission (FCSC) that listed November 7, 1917, the day of the October Revolution, as the end of Kompaniya Singer. The FCSC, which was established in the wake of World War II to seek reparations for the losses suffered by American individuals and institutions in the upheaval of the early twentieth century, required Singer to designate a date on which its “claim *originally* arose.”<sup>286</sup> Within its claim, Singer expands upon the difficulty of defining such a date:

Although actual physical confiscation of the Russian Company’s offices, shops, warehouses, factory, timberlands, stocks of merchandise, cash, accounts receivable and other assets was accomplished piecemeal by the Soviet Government as its control spread throughout Russia and was not completed until some time [*sic*] late in 1919, for all practical purposes Claimant’s loss arose November 7, 1917 when the Bolsheviks seized the government in Petrograd, because what business the Russian Company was able to conduct and what assets it retained temporarily after that date ultimately only benefited and fell into the hands of the Soviet Government and none of the proceeds or profits therefrom inured to the benefit of the Russian Company or Claimant in any way whatsoever.<sup>287</sup>

For the legal proceedings Singer was engaged in, this statement is apt. As a business, Kompaniya Singer did forfeit its profits and any sales after the revolution failed to financially benefit the company. While these were the only benefits of interest to the FCSC, there were other benefits that Singer and its employees continued to reap long after 1917. As this thesis has attempted to show, many of Singer’s employees found great value indeed in the “assets” Singer “temporarily retained” after the October Revolution. For those employees that became part of the company in exile or Douglas Alexander’s Russian “nucleus of an organization,” Kompaniya Singer carried on as a network and a facilitator of community until at least the late 1920s.

As the company in exile came to an end, however, Singer’s affidavit writers had to reimage and change their relationship to Singer. Many of these changes were in progress by the late 1920s. This thesis ends the story of Kompaniya Singer in roughly 1930. By the late 1920s,

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<sup>286</sup> Statement of Claim Against the Government of Russia, Claim No. Sov-40,920, Question 10, box 156, Singer Mss. (*italics in the original*)

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*

it seemed unlikely that Kompaniya Singer would ever reemerge. In 1930, Singer received for the second time a large collection of affidavits from Kompaniya Singer's former employees. The first group of affidavits, collected in 1921, had been solicited at a time when Kompaniya Singer's return to Russia still seemed possible. Under the direction of Voldemar Ernst, Singer's business continued in the Russian Far East. In 1921, the hope of reclaiming Singer's Russian business remained. By 1930, however, most of the affidavit writers were settled in other jobs and other locations. There was no longer the thought of personally returning to Russia and reconstituting Singer's business.

In one sense, however, even 1930 may be too early of an ending for Kompaniya Singer. Singer's claim with the FCSC was not submitted until 1956. In July 1959, the Singer Manufacturing Company was awarded \$56,287,962.58 in repayment for its losses, but Singer never received most of that sum.<sup>288</sup> As the FCSC website states: "The balance of the awards... remains unpaid and outstanding, pending conclusion of a final claims settlement agreement between the United States and what are now the republics of the former Soviet Union."<sup>289</sup> Financially, the story of Kompaniya Singer is ongoing, even if a final resolution seems increasingly unlikely as time goes on. Yet, for the company's employees the story is long since over. Walter Dixon died in 1935, and Otto Myslik followed in 1955. Both men made their careers with Singer as lifelong company men. Even after Russia, Singer remained an important piece of their identities.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> Federal Claims Settlement Commission, "Decisions and Annotations Regarding Claims Against the Soviet Union," 361-362, [https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/pages/attachments/2014/07/30/claims\\_against\\_the\\_soviet\\_union.pdf](https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/pages/attachments/2014/07/30/claims_against_the_soviet_union.pdf). The total award included a principal of \$29,561,309.06 and \$26,726,653.52 in interest accumulated until U.S.-Soviet American recognition on November 16, 1933.

<sup>289</sup> "Completed Programs Claims Against the Soviet Union," *Foreign Claims Settlement Commission of the U.S.*, updated July 30, 2014, <https://www.justice.gov/fcsc/completed-programs-claims-against-soviet-union>.

<sup>290</sup> "Walter Dixon, 70, Engineer, Is Dead," *New York Times*, June 19, 1935; "Otto Myslik, Aide of Singer Company [Obituary]," *New York Times*, May 26, 1955.

## Identifying with Singer

The importance of Singer as a network and an identity for its employees raises a problem: What role did Singer serve and how did identification with Singer complement or compete with other identities, such as nationality or class? Navigating and reimagining identity was not new to Singer's executives and company men. As the first chapter illustrates, Kompaniya Singer's leaders had reimagined the national identities of the company and themselves during the First World War. Singer sought, as best it could in light of its own business objectives, to conform to the Imperial Russian government's vision of Russianness and become more Russian. In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, however, Singer's leaders moved the company toward a different sort of Russianness and fundamentally a multi- and supranational identity. German subject employees and Russian subject ethnic Germans, who had been shunned by the Russian company during World War I, became the backbone of the company in exile. Was Singer's assertive Russianness during the War simply opportunism to ensure the business' continuation? Were the Singer executives deliberately making their company appear Russian in a way that it never was? Was the ethnically diverse company in exile only a slipping of this wartime veneer?

In some ways, yes. Singer did stress its Russianness during the First World War in ways that seem, at best, to overstate its case. Before the committee from the Zemgor, Walter Dixon stressed the strong, Russian credentials of Kompaniya Singer's executives even though the truth of these employees' ethnic identities was far more complex. Singer's survival (or, at least, its success) in the late Russian Empire necessitated the national fluidity of its executives and the company itself.<sup>291</sup> This fluidity and adaptability was a characteristic trait of the Singer Manufacturing Company, and perhaps even a prerequisite for its transnational and global

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<sup>291</sup> This national fluidity is one possible version of national indifference, as analyzed by Tara Zahra. Given the conscience molding and national identities by Kompaniya Singer, "national indifference" did not seem the appropriate term to use in the present discussion.

success. To the extent that Kompaniya Singer continued to tap into and used this national adaptability and fluidity from 1914 to 1930, the Russification of the company during the First World War would appear to be a façade.

This appearance is incomplete, however. There was something very real in Singer's quest to reimagine Kompaniya Singer as a Russian company, although it may not have been what the Singer executives expected to find. Singer's failure to successfully and convincingly argue for Kompaniya Singer's Russianness revealed the limits of identity fluidity. While the Singer executives did not blink at becoming more Russian, the Russian government squinted at them. To a government and business elite that were adopting an ethnically Russian national identity, Singer's Russification was unconvincing and incomplete. More importantly, it was impossible to make it complete. The multinational origins of Kompaniya Singer meant that the company would never have been able to be Russian in the same way that a native Russian enterprise would have. Singer's self-russification could only achieve so much; its potential was limited from the start.

A similar limitation affected the identities of Kompaniya Singer's employees throughout the period covered by this investigation. These limitations are obvious within the choices and circumstances of Otto Myslik. Myslik was legally a Russian subject, but he was not ethnically Russian. He was, as Mona Domosh had argued about Walter Dixon, embedded within the Imperial Russian culture, but he was also an outsider to ethnic Russian nationalism. Beyond ethnic and national identity, Myslik was also limited by class and status. He was an executive for a multinational capitalistic enterprise. Singer's records do not suggest that Myslik had any sympathy with Bolshevism, but even if he had been inclined towards joining in solidarity with workers his past opposition to workers' movements would not have recommended him. Like

Myslik, many of the affidavit writers would have had a hard time being accepted in the Bolshevik system. Bolshevism, like ethnic nationalism, was predicated on the existence of an “us” and a “them.” Kompaniya Singer’s employees most frequently found themselves as part of the “them.”

To the Singer Manufacturing Company, however, these same traits made the affidavit writers members of an “us.” Singer’s multinational enterprise necessitated a multinational, cosmopolitan network of managers. The company needed employees who could communicate in English with the American headquarters, interact with Kompaniya Singer’s ethnically German heritage, and also sell sewing machines to Russian peasants. Cosmopolitan, “Mercurial” employees were exceedingly valuable to Singer. The only way to expand or safeguard its business was to employ men and women with the linguistic and cultural adaptability of the newly mobile cosmopolitan business class. As bourgeois businessmen, Singer’s affidavit writers lived a new and newly necessary form of cosmopolitanism. Identification with corporate employers, especially multinational firms like Singer, was a fundamentally modern identity only made possible through the expanded communication infrastructure and increased mobility of the nineteenth century. For its modern cosmopolitan employees, however, identifying with Singer became a useful identity that could function in tandem with or in opposition to more commonly discussed identities like nation and class. Company men like the affidavit writers needed their companies for income, of course, but this thesis suggests that they also needed it for patronage and aid within their modern cosmopolitanism. Multinational enterprises were not fundamentally in the business of community building, but Singer became the unwitting sustainer of a valuable personal network for many of its cosmopolitan and mobile employees.

For Singer's German-speaking "Mercurian" employees (as discussed in Chapter 2), Kompaniya Singer and later the company in exile were nexuses of class and national community. Using Singer's communication networks and infrastructure, German-speaking employees maintained a loose social network. Singer's executives likely never intended to help sustain a minority ethnic community. Hiring German-speaking employees had been a matter of expediency, based on both Kompaniya Singer's historical ties to Germany and the "Mercurian" status of the Russian Empire's German-speaking subjects. Working against network building, Kompaniya Singer had willingly, although perhaps reluctantly, fired many of its German-speaking employees during the First World War. Yet, many ethnically German "Mercurians," even those interned during World War I, returned to Singer in the 1920s. To an extent, this return may be simply a way of earning a living in a familiar industry. For a mobile and transnational population like Kompaniya Singer's company men, however, the draw of continued association with a transnational enterprise makes sense. Singer had an infrastructure that supported their lifestyle and experience in a way that a nationally exclusive company could not.

Discussion of Singer as a community, however, is necessarily limited and problematic. Traditional communities are relational and spatially bounded. Such communities are created through face-to-face relationships or kinship bonds. Even within its German-speaking "Mercurian" population, Kompaniya Singer did not fit this pattern. It was too big and too diverse. If Singer can be spoken of as any sort of a community, then, it must be an imagined community of the style made famous by Benedict Anderson.



There is an important caveat to this appropriation of Anderson's terms, however. To Anderson, the national community is conceived as "a deep, horizontal comradeship."<sup>292</sup> Even if it is socially or economically false, the members of the national believe themselves to be equal. As a company, Singer included a distinct hierarchy. This hierarchy is reflected in the centrality of Otto Myslik within the imagined community of Kompaniya Singer. As the company's leader, Myslik was the hub of communication and the center of the Singer network. Myslik's former employees appealed to Myslik for help and clearly viewed him as an authority. In a similar vein, Myslik turned to Alexander as his supervisor. During the Russian Civil War, however, the firm hierarchy of peacetime was blurred. As the head of the company in exile, Myslik depended upon the information and loyalty of his trusted employees within Russia. These employees functioned with an autonomy that was unprecedented for Singer. Although the relationships between Myslik and his employees were never truly horizontal, they were reciprocal and less fixed than is typically the case in a business setting. Traditional business practices were impossible in the uncertainty and flux of the Russian Revolution. This fluctuation created more improvisational business strategies and a more mutually dependent, if not necessarily egalitarian, network. There was a symbiosis between employee and company.

### **Cosmopolitans and a Transnational Elite**

The interdependence and reciprocal networks of Singer and its affidavit writers provides an additional perspective from which to consider the dynamics of the transnational business class in the twenty-first century. The rise of a transnational capitalist class had been remarked upon in the literature on twenty-first century globalization, but the networks forged by Singer's company a century earlier raise questions about how new a phenomenon this truly is.

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<sup>292</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.

That is not to say that Singer's employees were in every way similar to the employees of the twenty-first century. Kompaniya Singer's affidavit writers were not necessarily financially well to do. They were certainly not all members of an economically elite class. Kompaniya Singer's affidavit writers ranged in profession from company executives (e.g. Dixon and Myslik) to factory foremen (e.g. Owczarski). This diversity within their ranks would logically correlate to differences in income and perhaps even social circles. If in fact these employees were members of a single class, it was a class with substantial diversity. Moreover, the world in which Kompaniya Singer's employees worked, while it was more interconnected than the earlier world had ever been, pales in comparison to the globalization of the twenty-first century. Technological innovations have made the present world far smaller and the communication networks far richer.

This wealth of communication networks hints at perhaps the largest divergence between the experience of Singer's affidavit writers and more recent discussions of a transnational business elite: Singer's employees were tied to Singer as an important facilitator of their cosmopolitan community, while many scholars of the current trends in globalization suggest the existence of a global class that operates without such a unifying institution. On the surface this divergence is not surprising. Singer was one of a very small number of multinational corporations in the early twenty-first century, and the existence of a transnational class network separate from the company was neither feasible nor necessary. There simply were not enough bourgeois cosmopolitans to establish the kind of vast networks that are observed by scholars of the present state of global industry. Digging deeper, however, Singer's experience raises questions about the role of employers in the maintenance of the twenty-first century global elite. Like Singer's employees, today's cosmopolitan businessmen and businesswomen are dependent

on their employers for economic stability and often legal standing within their country of residence. Like Singer's employees, they are tied to that institution and they benefit from its networks and influence. Such varieties make the cosmopolitan network of Singer, or other corporations, different from the transnational class of our era, although they would certainly be useful parallels within twenty-first century corporations.

Although it was principally a business, Singer was also a network and a community for the employees that could choose to relate to Singer on such terms. It is not entirely clear which employees had this choice. Would a factory line worker or a salesman in a remote shop have had the same access to Singer's community that was afforded employees at the Moscow offices? Were such employees privy to the same cosmopolitan identity that permeated the ranks of the affidavit writers? These questions are yet to be explored. A more complete investigation of the Kompaniya Singer staff, including its ethnically Russian and locally established employees would help to clarify the strands of national and cosmopolitan identities within the company as well as illuminate the dynamics undergirding Singer's role as a community. The Russian context has provided a rich study for the examination of the adaptability of a multinational enterprise, but placing Kompaniya Singer's experience in dialogue with other Singer Manufacturing Company outposts could allow for the discernment of further patterns or contradictions within Singer's imagined communities. In particular, it would be beneficial to consider the actions of Singer's European networks in the World War II era.

While these comparisons could expand the picture of community and identity within the Singer network, perhaps the more significant expansions of this study would address the intersections of cosmopolitanism, identity, and community within the era of early multinational corporations. As these behemoths emerged within the business world, how did they shape and

respond to the forces of nationalism, internationalism, and class identity? How did the positions of these resource-rich companies reflect or form the perspectives and identities of their employees? The discussion of late nineteenth and early twentieth century European history is often dominated by the discussion of nationalism and national identity. The study of how average men and women contributed to and benefited from large multinational corporations and organizations, which necessarily functioned with a level of national indifference, may help to broaden our understanding of identity construction.

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