

# Chinese Workers in Russia

By [Olga Alexeeva](#)

**During the war, the Tsarist government imported large groups of Chinese to the Russian Empire to work behind the front lines. Despite their important contribution to the Russian war effort, Chinese workers' war experiences remain largely forgotten, often overshadowed by their participation in the Russian Civil War (1917-1921). This article examines the process of workers' recruitment in China and their employment conditions in wartime Russia.**

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## Introduction

Like all other European nations engaged in the war, [Russia's economy](#) faced a serious shortage of human resources, both because of the massive mobilization and the growing number of battle [casualties](#). At first, the Tsarist [government](#) decided to compensate the deficit of working hands by using the [labor](#) of [women](#) and [war prisoners](#). When these measures proved to be insufficient, [Russia](#) had to resort to importing workers from [China](#). Using the Russian presence in Manchuria and the Trans-Siberian railway, Russian and Chinese brokers launched various recruiting schemes to supply laborers for Russian wartime industry and agriculture. As the seasonal [migration](#) of Chinese workers to the Russian Far East had been a firmly established practice since the late 1890s, Russian recruiting operations in China reached unprecedented levels during the war and initially aroused little resistance among the Chinese authorities.

## Emergence of a Sino-Russian Recruitment System

Russia first started recruiting Chinese laborers at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the rapid economic development of the Russian Far East called for a large workforce. Internal migration was unable to satisfy this demand. Using [Chinese workers](#) – who lived in geographical proximity and were ready to work for a fraction of a Russian worker's wage – seemed like a convenient solution. To find candidates, Russian private companies and state projects used the services of Chinese agents who carried out the recruitment in China, mostly in the Shandong and Hebei provinces and, later on, in Manchuria. They contracted workers, individually or in groups, obtained passports and Russian visas for them and arranged for their [transportation](#) by ship to Vladivostok or by train to Harbin, from where they proceeded to their final destination. Chinese workers helped Russians build the Trans-Siberian Railway and local [urban](#) infrastructure, as well as create self-reliant agriculture, thus playing an important role in the economic development of the Russian Far East.

## Wartime Recruitment Operations

The existence of this fully functional system allowed Russians to quickly set up their wartime recruitment. Deployed all over the Russian Empire, the Chinese constructed railways in the polar zones of Northern Russia, cut timber in the Siberian taiga, loaded and unloaded boats on the docks of Petrograd on the Baltic Sea and worked in the coal mines of the Donetsk region in [Ukraine](#). Estimates range between 100,000 and 500,000 workers, as neither Russian nor Chinese authorities maintained regular records. In 1916, the Tsarist government simplified the recruitment process by putting it under the control of the Russian administration of the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER) in Harbin. The CER took care of all administrative formalities; its personnel performed the initial medical examination of workers and furnished them with clothes and provisions for the journey before putting them on the guarded trains. Once in Russia, the Chinese often had to endure awful conditions. They worked ten or eleven hours a day, seven days a week, and lived in badly heated and overcrowded barracks, sometimes devoid of a water supply and basic sanitation facilities. Many fell ill from the intense damp and cold, as well as from the lack of [medical care](#) and [food](#). These appalling conditions routinely sparked [protests and violent riots](#) that were harshly suppressed by Russian authorities, who considered these incidents mutiny and sabotage of war-related production. After receiving the reports on the ill treatment of workers in Russia, the Chinese government demanded its official representatives be allowed to accompany major groups of laborers to Russia and stay there with them, so they could defend [laborers' rights](#). Although Russians refused to satisfy these demands, they adopted a series of measures regulating the use of Chinese labor during the war.

## Conclusion

With the outbreak of the [Russian Revolution in 1917](#), thousands of Chinese workers found themselves trapped in the European part of the Russian Empire in the midst of great turmoil. Some of them managed to return to China by travelling around the war zones, while others became recruits

for the Red Army and various guerilla groups which clashed in the [Russian Civil War](#). Their wartime experiences and cross-cultural encounters in Russia played a certain role in shaping China's political trajectory in the interwar period and their legacy remains today in the narrative of contemporary Sino-Russian relations.

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