

Prosperity and Conflict in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Rostov-on-Don: Russian, Cossack, and Armenian Economic Cultures on the Northern Black Sea Coast

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During the nineteenth century, the Russian settlement of Rostov and the Armenian colony of Nakhichevan on Don slowly merged into a single urban and economic space. This contribution analyses how these increasingly entangled communities negotiated conflicts and to what extent disputes about trading opportunities and state privileges shaped their urban identities. On the empire's periphery, Armenians, Russians and Cossacks framed their positions with narratives of soslovie, class or religious belonging, until the beginning of the Great Reforms, when the state increasingly levelled differences in administration and economy and growing national sentiments increasingly altered multiethnic communal life.

Key words: Rostov-on-Don, economy, Armenians, urban identity, trade

Introduction

“Be on guard at the market! To cheat on you, it takes ten Jews, five Greeks, but only one Armenian!” This warning circulated among Russian merchants (*kuptsy*) at the Black Sea markets of the nineteenth century and ranks the tsar’s non-Russian subjects by their degree of deceitfulness and dishonest calculus when conducting the business of trade. Armenians seem to be those around whom a Russian trader should be most cautious. Count Peter Pallas, travelling around the new south Russian provinces by order of Empress Catherine II, drew an entirely different picture. In the late summer of 1794, Pallas’s retinue arrived in Nakhichevan, an Armenian colony founded 32 kilometers away from where the Don entered the Sea of Azov. The count was amazed by the short period of 16 years the Armenian settlers needed to erect a flourishing settlement on the edge of the steppe. “The vitality of the Armenians’ industries, their factories, their craftsmen and trading enterprises compared with those of the Russians and the Greeks, yes, even the German ones, is so striking, that a decent patriot is instantly driven by the desire to move the whole Armenian people from the Aras plateau into Russia. If properly encouraged they would easily accept such an offer.”¹ From Pallas’s state-bound perspective, the Armenians exhibited certain attributes well suited to the Catherinian *Zeitgeist* of revitalizing the empire and its economy. In his account, Pallas further contrasted “diligent, sober and good Armenian peasants” with “hostile and malevolent Don-Cossacks,” who, according to him, rejected Catherine’s call for revitalization. The

contrast between the warning about Armenians shared among merchants and Pallas's esteem reflects on a set of specific historic experiences worth exploring. Both answer the question of whether ethnic diversity was a boon or a threat to the empire's prosperity quite differently, a question this paper will address with a local perspective on Nakhichevan and Rostov-on-Don.

The Russian Empire's definitive arrival at the northern shores of the Black Sea at the end of the eighteenth century constitutes a major caesura in the empire's foreign and domestic policy alike.² The political, social, cultural, and economic transformation that ensued when integrating the vast area into the empire's fabric had a long-lasting influence way beyond the demise of the Russian monarchy. Constant access to the Black Sea served the economic imperatives of St. Petersburg and transformed the country's economy towards the export of increasing amounts of grain, an export that would eventually become a cornerstone of financing late industrialization in the second half of the nineteenth century. The possession of the northern coastline of the Black Sea, with the "pearl" of Crimea, put Russia in the center of a constant exchange of goods, peoples and ideas that influenced the very character of the empire.³ Russian expansion and settlement of the new areas represented an ambivalent and complex process, something that Marc Raeff has pointed out, arguing against current views of the northern Black Sea's integration as a linear "success story." According to Raeff, this approach "harbors the danger of anachronistic judgement."⁴ The settlement of the area (*zaseleniye*) with Ukrainian and Russian peasants, Serbs, Germans, Greeks, and Armenians, alongside the construction of towns (*gradostroitelstvo*), became the main tools of empire-building in the region, soon to be called "New Russia." The limits of Catherine's and Potemkin's vision become apparent, however, when we study the fate of the ambitious plans to fashion Ekaterinoslavl' as "the Athens of southern Russia" or the limited success of German settlers in spreading their knowledge and work ethic among the Russian peasantry.⁵ The building and development of towns (into cities) in New Russia has received a fair amount of attention, in particular the fate of Odessa, the most prominent example of flourishing urbanization in New Russia.⁶ With the exception of existing Crimean settlements and newly founded towns, most urban structures—either port towns or administrative centers—developed around points of military significance, such as fortresses.⁷ A promising yet understudied case for analyzing the transformation of these new towns into developed urban centers of their own within a multiethnic context is the Don delta region and its center, today's Rostov-on-Don. The city became one of the empire's main gateways to the Black Sea during the nineteenth century. Its social and economic development was coined by the interaction between its Russian core and the Armenian colony of Nakhichevan on the one hand and the Don Cossack area surrounding it on the other. Its proximity to the Armenian settlement, which enjoyed several privileges of self-administration, and the area's island position

within the Don Cossack Region distinguished Rostov from other cities of the Russian Empire with regard to its socio-economic and political constitution. It thus provides an interesting space for Russian and Black-Sea history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Crucial to New Russia's economic success was the accommodation of different ethnic groups in a local setting: How did these respective economic cultures shape a common economic and social space? What role can we ascribe to the geographical location that remained peripheral long after its formal integration into the state? To what extent did this coexistence of different economic cultures serve as a catalyst or obstacle to prosperity?

One way of approaching the history of Rostov is through the prism of imperial politics. The empire's economic, political, and military interests overlapped constantly during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The city provided a crucial node in the wars against the Ottoman Empire, for the domination of the Black Sea, and for the provision of troops and cargo in the Caucasian Wars that lasted nearly a century. Its harbor and customs post became vital in exploration and the expansion of Russian trade with the Caucasian mountaineers. Several reforms reflect this link of economic and military interests. In 1887, the State Council and the War Ministry in St. Petersburg transferred Rostov and Nakhichevan to the Autonomous Don Cossack District in order to overcome the severe economic stagnation of the latter caused by its increasingly outdated social institutions. As a major export hub for grain, Rostov's potential to contribute to the financial prosperity of the empire was realized from early on. A report from the ministry of the Interior in 1840 estimated optimistically that Rostov could surpass Odessa as the Empire's main export port for grain at the end of the century.⁸ On the other hand, compared to Odessa, Taganrog, or Novochoerkassk, the city never received the same amount of attention from the imperial center's city planners. Only at the beginning of the twentieth century did it receive the status of a regional administrative center.

Viewing Rostov only in the context of its value to the empire, however, does not give sufficient justice to the region's specific character, as migration and ethnic diversity created a unique setting of economic interaction and conflict. Migration, both domestic and foreign, legal and illegal, shaped the area's socio-economic and ethnic fabric. Catherine the Great's settlement policy for New Russia aimed at encouraging Russian peasants from the central regions to resettle to New Russia guaranteeing tax exemptions or immunities to generate provisions for the army.⁹ Nobles who had received land for their services resettled whole serf villages into New Russia. Yet illegal migration to the south, a much older historical phenomenon, remained a constant source of concern for St. Petersburg, as peasants fleeing from the oppressive system of serfdom would deprive the nobility, the estate Catherine II. so carefully nurtured, of its economic foundation in the long run. Until the 1840s, the garrison of The Fortress of Saint Dimitriy of Rostov sent expeditions

throughout the district to catch these runaway serfs, or *begly*, while the crown regularly reminded Cossack atamans about sending *begly* back to their masters in the north.¹⁰ Nevertheless, these migration flows were central to the economic life of the region. They not only provided the local economy with a potential workforce decades before the abolition of serfdom in the mid-nineteenth century, they also left an imprint on the illegal economy: In the mid-nineteenth century, the forging of passports for escaped peasants and counterfeit money became the most prominent forms of economic crime in the Cossacks' capital Novocherkassk and in the Armenian city of Nakhichevan.¹¹

Besides the ethnic blending of Russians, Ukrainians, Cossacks, Armenians, Kalmyk, and Tatars, ethnicities encompassed by the Russian Empire, an increasing number of merchants of Greek and English descent settled in Rostov for business as well. They not only linked Rostov with trade networks unfolding between Russia and Western Europe,¹² their presence and the capital they invested also redirected trade routes in the empire, transforming the local economy and its different economic cultures.

These economic cultures included culturally and religiously grounded ideas of a just economy, a specific understanding of property rights, as well as economic practices of production and distribution. Max Weber famously considered protestant work ethics as the bridge between religious convictions and economic premises and behavior.¹³ In the Russian Empire, the community of Old Believers has been discussed as one viable example of a marginalized and prosecuted community with specific religious values that contributed to their economic success in the Moscow regions textile and craft market.¹⁴ We can understand economic cultures as the economically related patterns of thought, perception, and behavior of a distinct social group, both on the level of discourse and practice.¹⁵ Local economic cultures were articulated in petitions, found their expression in the daily trading practices at local markets, or permeated statements made at commercial courts. The proximity of Russians, Armenians, and Cossacks in the Rostov region provides us with an opportunity to improve our understanding of economic transformation of the Russian empire's multiethnic periphery. It is during this period, between Catherine II's reign and the late nineteenth century, when the eighteenth century's "interethnic division of labor"¹⁶ was transformed by demographic change, migration, state politics of modernization, and the transformation of the Russian markets.

Unique to the ethnic communities in Rostov and Nakhichevan is their spatial proximity while being divided in two different political and social structures at the same time. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these two cities slowly merged into one southeastern metropole. The leading encyclopedia *Brokgauz-Efron* reminded its readers in 1897: "Recently Nakhichevan has expanded towards Rostov so drastically that one needs to look into the old plan

of 1811 to rediscover their actual political border.”¹⁷ Both cities expanded during the second half of the nineteenth century, especially after the abolition of serfdom and the expansion of Black Sea trade, slowly merging into one urban structure linked by public transport, annually described in address books and almanacs, and even supervised by a shared police administration. Yet the division into two different political entities with local self-administration remained intact beyond the end of the Russian empire. Within this framework, exemplary conflicts of (1) land distribution, (2) the river Don, (3) the customs system, and (4) the question of nationality can help us to shed light on Russian, Armenian and Cossack economic cultures and their gradual transformation.

Land

Rostov developed on the lower Don from small settlements located west of the fortress of Saint Dimitriy of Rostov in the last third of the eighteenth century. Its coat of arms, divided into a blue field on the left and a red field on the right, illustrates the military importance ascribed to it. According to the official description, a tower on the blue field signifies a barricade against raids of the neighboring predatory peoples and the Empire’s superiority over them while the red field shows the trophies of armaments seized from them. Due to its auspicious geographical location, Rostov was transformed from a military settlement on the Russian border with the Ottoman Empire, housing some 1,200 residents, into the central trading hub of Russia’s southeast. At the end of the nineteenth century, its population having increased to 100,000, Rostov connected trade flows from Siberia, the Urals, the Volga basin, and Russia’s grain provinces with the Sea of Azov, the Black Sea, and the Caucasus. Trade networks multiplied after new train lines connected Rostov to Novorossiya, Prikavkaz, and the central provinces surrounding Moscow and St. Petersburg

Armenians resettled from Crimea founded Nakhichevan east of the fortress of St. Dimitry in the 1780s. The process of resettlement, set into motion by Catherine II, drained the weakened Crimean Khanate of its most important economic actors and used them to develop the formerly “wild field” that was to become New Russia. The Armenians were one of the first groups, alongside the Greeks actively resettled into New Russia under Count Potemkin in order to develop the area. Benefitting from privileges of self-government, the remission of taxes and services, as well as the generous financial support from Armenian communities in Persia and India, Nakhichevan quickly turned into a flourishing town of traders and carpenters with 5,000 residents at the turn of the century.¹⁸ Since the seventeenth century, the Russian state constantly provided the Armenian communities with privileges and monopolies over long-distance trade in order to benefit from their trading networks linking India and Persia with Western Europe.¹⁹ Due to their seclusion and corporative organization, the influence on local agriculture was rather

insignificant.²⁰ However, in Nakhichevan, Armenians would not only provide credit for Russian merchants who suffered from the general lack of capital but also provide them temporary access to their trade networks to purchase rare goods from greater distances.²¹ Most importantly, the Armenians secured provisions for skilled artisans, the predominant profession in the first half of the nineteenth century. 2,940 craftspeople (out of a total population of approximately 8,000) were registered in 1822.²² These artisans significantly contributed to regional development: Industries supplied by their shops for tanning, candle making, tool manufacture, or wine and liquor production increased the city's attraction for merchants from Odessa and abroad, who settled permanently in Rostov or opened a branch of their own business there. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, Rostov offered not only the chance for merchants to export raw materials but, increasingly, ways of processing them locally before export.

Arguing for a specific economic mentality of the Armenians is tempting but not easy to ground empirically. The Armenian historian Sarkis Kazarov, with some over-embellishment, argues that the Armenian "love for work, entrepreneurial spirit, resourcefulness and skill as well as honesty and neatness were necessary for economic success."²³ A more prominent characteristic of the Armenian business practices was the eagerness to keep revenues and expenses balanced and, if need be, radically cut expenses. Much of the Armenians' reputation among Russian merchants as being greedy derived from these economic behaviors, today considered as rational.²⁴ Accordingly, merchants would purchase goods at the end of trade fairs around Rostov, when prices would have dropped. Repeatedly, this caused their Russian counterparts to complain to the vicegerent in Taganrog about Armenians' "unchristian trading practices"²⁵ The resemblance of these complaints to those of Muscovite merchants in the sixteenth century against English traders in Archangelsk should raise caution about taking these claims as proof of a genuine religiously founded economic culture.²⁶ It rather illuminates ways of framing economic interests with religious narratives promising success in a specific situation. However, the practices of Russian merchants' economic culture did not remain static and gradually changed by Rostov's burgeoning entanglement with Black Sea trade. From the 1840s onwards, an increasing number of Russian merchants sold their goods at the Rostov trade fair in late summer at prices significantly beyond the value of the goods. Their aim was to quickly accumulate cash money, constantly in shortage within the country, in order to travel to the northern grain-producing provinces in order to buy grain and linen seeds; these they could sell to Greek and English traders in Rostov with considerable profit margins.²⁷

For their part, the Don Cossacks inhabiting the vast area surrounding Rostov and Nakhichevan had since the seventeenth century received numerous economic monopolies from the Russian tsars that were to provide the economic basis for

their existence and their ability to provide military service to the Empire when necessary. Among the Don Cossacks' economic activities, the most important included raising cattle and horses, exploiting salt lakes in the region, mining anthracite, fishing in the Don, and taking advantage of the right to customs-free trade in their products. The constant pursuit of such activities also helped define their identity.²⁸ After the Cossack hosts gradually lost their independence to the Russian tsars in the seventeenth century and the Cossack and peasant uprisings in the eighteenth century, Count Potemkin, as the architect for New Russia, decided to enact a systematic subjugation of the Cossacks in order to erase the security threat once and for all.²⁹ Don Cossacks increasingly perceived the expansion of Russian military presence in the Don region as a potential risk to their independence and something that portended Cossacks' gradual inclusion in the Russian military forces. The fortress St. Dimitry, the later nucleus of Rostov, became a symbol of that threat, since the loss of autonomy was aggravated by new limits on Cossacks' fishing privileges and new customs controls at the nearby post on the Temernik River.³⁰ Don Ataman Efremov and his troops' open refusal to obey in the 1770s led to the former's arrest. Catherine and Potemkin, faced with the escalating Pugachev revolt, secured the support of the Don Cossacks for the crown by pardoning Efremov and generously reinstating and extending the economic privileges of the Cossack *stanitsy* around Rostov.³¹ As a second strategy of this twofold approach for subjecting the Don Region to central control, Potemkin coopted the Cossack elite into the Russian nobility, providing them with titles, ranks, and hereditary land.³²

According to various economic indicators such agricultural and (pre-)industrial productivity, the Oblast' of the Don Cossack Host was among the most backward areas of the empire at the end of the nineteenth century, despite its economic and demographic potential.³³ The characterization of the Cossacks' economic culture as rather conservative and hostile to social change and economic modernization is underlined by local resistance to establish the *zemstvo* system in the reform period. Only after six years, the project to establish *zemstvo* structures was abolished due to Cossack opposition.³⁴ Motives for rejecting aspects of modernization however differed – while the Don Cossacks nobility did not show any interest in sharing local power with new *Zemstvo* institutions, simple Cossacks in their settlements would risk their cattle and horses by not letting veterinarians vaccinate or treat them out of superstition. Nonetheless, Cossacks played a significant role in developing and exploiting the economic potential of the region between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, all the more as some of the Cossacks' economic interests and imperatives were compatible with those of the Russian and Armenian communities. The existence of a Union of Trade Cossacks within the Cossack host proves, that at least for a time, certain segments within the Cossack communities were willing to engage in economic activity that went beyond barter trade and that depended on longer time horizons.³⁵ The Cossacks' small sailing

ships on the Don (*strugi*) served in the waging of war against the Ottomans in the eighteenth century. However, Russian observers in the late nineteenth century found them to be archaic and proof of Cossacks' inability to adapt to the age of steamships. Nonetheless, the *strugi* retained their economic importance for cargo transport well into the second half of the century, thanks to the shoals of the Don.³⁶ Despite the skepticism of the Cossack community towards modernization in general, traditional cargo transport that increased drastically over the course of the century provided a significant income for those settlements located on the river's embankments. Despite their grievances, the Cossack economy became increasingly linked with those in the city by mid-century. Rostov and Nakhichevan turned into a proxy sales market for Cossack-produced salt that the Armenians would need for curing their fish, while anthracite mined by the Cossacks slowly began to replace the scarce wood as the main fuel in the southern step region.³⁷

One central issue of conflict between the communities was land. The Russian state granted Nakhichevan more than half of the 260 square kilometers of land that had previously belonged to the Cossacks, the fortress, and its settlements. 24,000 *dessyatiny* were split into 4,000 for the fortress and 20,000 for the Armenian settlement. The fact that the first decree of Catherine regarding the colony had only granted 12,000 *dessyatiny* in 1779 suggest that the delegates of the Armenian community in the capital had been successful in representing their interests at the court through informal channels.³⁸

With the population of Rostov growing significantly faster than that of Nakhichevan, the proportion of land held by each city remained a constant source of conflict throughout the nineteenth century. The Armenian magistrate frequently complained against the "wild settlements" erected by *begly* from the center of the empire.³⁹ Thousands of *begly*, lured by the promise of economic and social improvement and the myth of a secure space in the south ("On the Don no one gets handed over" – "S Dona vydachi net"),⁴⁰ built houses and huts close to the Don and the markets, ignoring any borders between the two communities.

For Armenians though, settling outside their own territory could increase the risk of being robbed or murdered by vagabonds or Cossacks.⁴¹ Several cases of such attacks against residents in the five Armenian villages surrounding Nakhichevan in the early period of the two cities (1790–1820) led the local courts and the commander of the fortress to get involved.⁴² The Viceregency of Taganrog as well as the governor in Ekaterinoslavl' clearly understood the security issues linked to the question of land property as they reviewed and demanded better protection of the land property. The uneven distribution of land between the two cities, however, remained unchanged. Before the First World War, Nakhichevan could compensate its smaller trade revenues in comparison to Rostov by renting land to carpenters, traders and businessmen, thereby significantly increasing its annual budget.⁴³

The river

The river Don, as the main hub for trade and source for fishing, became the site of conflict between Armenians, the citizens of Rostov, and Cossacks since the foundation of the settlements. The arrival of the Armenians amplified the preexisting conflict between Russians settled around the fortress and Cossacks regarding fishing rights in the lower Don and its delta. Don Cossacks felt that their monopoly on fishing and custom-free trade granted by the tsars in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a monopoly that provided them a considerable source of income, had been violated. The court in St. Petersburg was forced to mediate these conflicts throughout the nineteenth century.⁴⁴

With the two cities gradually emerging as economic centers, the river could turn into a locus of contestation in trade. In 1840, Armenians started building shops on the left embankment of the Don, opposite to Rostov's port, and bought most incoming food from the surrounding areas, food that previously had been sold directly on the market in Rostov to the Russian urban population.⁴⁵ The Cossack providers benefitted from the Armenian's restructuring of the regions market, as time and effort for selling their goods on the local market could be spared. Yet the resale of fish, grain, vegetables, and meat to the residents of Rostov by the Armenians led to an increase of market prices and hardship among the poorer strata of the local population. In this case the Armenians' economic agility threatened the public order and the governor was, a year later, to give in to a petition and forbid this form of trade.⁴⁶

At the same time, the river as the lifeline of both cities demanded technical, administrative, and financial cooperation in order to adapt to modernization. Both city dumas cooperated in building a new bridge in the 1860s⁴⁷ and in accumulating the financial means to rent an expensive dredge able to deepen the river for the passage of bigger ships in 1899.⁴⁸ Later on, a common horse tramline serviced main streets and squares in both cities. The Delta Committee, founded in 1865, became an institution of merchants, experts, and state administrators of different nationalities that explored the delta, accumulated financial support from the state, and realized different projects to deepen the last 20 kilometers of the river between the cities and the Sea of Azov.⁴⁹

The Custom system

Since 1749, when Empress Elizabeth founded the first customs post in the region near the Temernik River, Cossacks and the state engaged in endless conflicts over taxation and its evasion.⁵⁰ In the nineteenth century, it was thanks to the efforts of Governor Vorontsov that the establishment of a customs post in Rostov in 1836 boosted Rostov's economic development and significantly increased the financial radius of operation of its administration, 35 years prior to the reform of the city administration. Within just ten years, trading volume in Rostov increased thirty

times, surpassing that of the Vicegerency of Taganrog.⁵¹ While the total volume of trade in 1823 was under 150,000 silver rubles, the opening of the customs post increased the volume from 342,000 rubles in 1836 to 2.8 million ten years later. In 1848, the magistrate of Nakhichevan appealed to the authorities in Taganrog and the governor and demanded that the 10 percent share of the customs revenue the state had granted to Rostov's city budget should be shared with Nakhichevan.⁵² The members of its Magistrate argued that many cargo goods were actually stored on the cities' part of the right embankment of the Don before being shipped, and that Rostov already possessed two large fairs as a considerable sources of income.⁵³ Although the governor denied the claim by pointing out that only 5 percent of the exported goods actually came from Nakhichevan, the whole case set an avalanche of statistical evaluation in motion and increased the attention of the central authorities on the prosperity of the cities. Given the practice of exporting goods from the countless warehouses on the right embankment, the distinction between the two cities had already become blurred.

Nationality

Despite their growing economic entanglement and the increasing consolidation of the two urban structures into one, Rostov and Nakhichevan remained two separate political entities until the end of the empire. During the first decades after the establishment of the New Russian territories, the ties between Small Russian and New Russian inhabitants were significantly greater than those between migrants from Central Russia and New Russian residents. According to John LeDonne, these mutual affinities benefitted from the presence of the large Cossack population, extensive networks of Greek communities and the geophysical unity of the Dnepr basin.⁵⁴ However, the increasingly nationalized political discourse under the reign of Alexander III and Nicholas II, as well as the transfer of both cities to the Oblast' of the Don Cossack Host in 1887-'88 made the vague category of Russian nationality a predominant factor within debates on urban consolidation and economic prosperity.⁵⁵ The decline of the economic status of the Don Cossacks made nationalistic narratives effective tools to frame socioeconomic change that had already began undermining the status of the Cossack community. Given the predominance of Don Cossacks in the Rostov area and an increasing number of lower-class laborers from central Russia that immigrated, the perception of Armenians in the region gradually changed. Cossacks felt a growing contrast between their symbolic military role for the Russian state and their declining economic status, as the Don-Region remained economically stagnant, despite its enormous economic potential.⁵⁶ The experiment of uniting Rostov with the Don-Cossack district in order to improve the economic situation lasted only from 1886 to 1904.⁵⁷ The opening of the oblast' to foreign investment increased the popular perception that the Armenians personified a capitalist modernization in which the

Cossacks were not participants.⁵⁸ The Russian-Cossack local historian A.M. Grekov claimed in books and newspaper articles that the Armenians “received land in the interest of developing the region, which they did not do, but rather enriched themselves at the expense of the Russian population.”⁵⁹

Among the cosmopolitan-minded economic elites of Rostov, a strong Russian national sentiment did not seem to have spread significantly by the turn of the century. However, some of the existing Societies for Mutual Credit, which provided local entrepreneurs with capital, began to restrict their activity to Russians only.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the *duma* of Nakhichevan repeatedly refused attempts by the Rostov city *duma* to unite the two cities as the Armenians would have been degraded in a unified city *duma* to a minority. Although in the last decades of the empire, the overarching majority of Nakhichevan’s citizens were Russians, the restrictive electoral law ensured the political dominance of the Armenian elites; most of the city’s real estate (possession of which granted suffrage) belonged to the Armenians. In this specific setting, the strict electoral census system that allowed only a fraction of the residents of one city to vote for representatives in its *duma*, a system otherwise associated with the repression of Russian civil society by the autocratic state, became the means to ensure the political power of a minority ethnic elite whose population had experienced unfavorable demographic development.

Conclusion

This contribution has considered the interactions, cooperation, and conflict between ethnic communities whose separate settlements in South Russia gradually merged into one urban space. Especially in the period prior to the Great Reforms, different economic cultures came into conflict and were renegotiated within a space that promised prosperity to its inhabitants. In many cases, ethnic difference was far less important than economic matters; to understand Rostov as a multiethnic imperial city in the nineteenth century requires us to take as much a class perspective on class as one of nationality or ethnicity. Modernization in the Russian Empire depended on the interaction between the central authorities and the peripheries that ought to be modernized. Both cities developed into one main gate of the Russian Empire towards the Black Sea. During the course of the nineteenth century, questions of ethnic difference became a proxy for economic matters, with ethnic belonging increasingly becoming a proxy for class interests as the nineteenth century progressed as well as well. The very rivalry of these groups meant the state was constantly called on to adjudicate. While conflict over the ways of conducting economic life was therefore central to maintaining difference, it also created patterns of interaction between separate groups. Some groups such as Armenians, Greeks and later European traders became increasingly linked to international trade, thus becoming vehicles for the large-scale reorganization of economic life in the city. The first Russian merchants engaging in trade with

Greek and English grain buyers not only benefitted from high profit margins and managed to increase their social status, but foreign traders also served as catalysts for adapting and transforming local economic cultures

With the increasing economic significance of the area, the political self-confidence of local elites, and the growing number of infrastructural challenges, the ability for Rostov and Nakhichevan to negotiate and solve the problems between them became a crucial prerequisite for modernizing the urban space. When Russian and Armenian merchants or members of their respective administration agreed on long-term investments for a common horse tram, to build a bridge, or to modernize the embankment of the river, they did so with common economic interests and from a similar position within the social hierarchy of the empire.

Most major conflicts before the 1880s evolved around the balance between the economic exploitation of the region's space and sometimes conflicting understandings of justice within the two communities. The Russian state protected the Armenians' privileges as long as their economic activity did not threaten the social and public order. The nationalization of public discourse at the end of the nineteenth century—accompanied by the decrease in symbolic protection—and demographic transformation also encouraged Armenian elites to consider their community and political dominance as national. The limitation of voting rights for the city *duma* offered them a means to secure their political and economic position vis-à-vis a growing Russian majority within Nakhichevan itself. Contrary to this political entrenchment, spatial markers of difference between the Russian and Armenian community had increasingly vanished from the city map.

About the author

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