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JAPANESE AUTHORITIES' POLICY TOWARD THE JEWISH DIASPORA IN HARBIN (1931–1937)

MENG TIANXIANG^a

^aBelarusian State University, 4 Niezaliezhnasci Avenue, Minsk 220030, Belarus

Abstract. After the 1917 October Revolution and the Russian Civil War, Russian Jews settled in Harbin, forming the Far East's largest Jewish community by 1920. This article examines the difficult years of the Jewish diaspora in Harbin from 1931 to 1937, through some dimensions: identity of its status in Manchukuo, persecution by Russian fascists, and Japanese suppression of dissent. Drawing on archival sources and literature, it is shown that Japanese policy entailed systematic oppression, economic exploitation, and harsh repression, largely executed in collaboration with the antisemitic All-Russian fascist party.

Keywords: Japan; Manchukuo; Jewish diaspora; Harbin; All-Russian fascist party.

ПОЛИТИКА ЯПОНСКИХ ВЛАСТЕЙ В ОТНОШЕНИИ ЕВРЕЙСКОЙ ДИАСПОРЫ В ХАРБИНЕ (1931–1937)

МЭН ТЯНЬСЯН¹⁾

¹⁾Белорусский государственный университет, пр. Независимости, 4, 220030, г. Минск, Беларусь

Аннотация. После Октябрьской революции 1917 г. и гражданской войны русские евреи поселились в Харбине, образовав крупнейшую еврейскую общину на Дальнем Востоке к 1920 г. Тяжелый период жизни еврейской диаспоры в Харбине в 1931–1937 гг. рассматривается с разных точек зрения: сохранения еврейской идентичности в Маньчжоу-Го, преследования со стороны русских фашистов и подавления протестов представителей диаспоры японскими властями. Анализируется политика японских властей в отношении еврейской диаспоры в Харбине в рассматриваемый период. На основе архивных данных и литературных источников показывается, что эта политика характеризовалась систематическими преследованиями, репрессиями и экономической эксплуатацией, осуществляемыми в основном в сотрудничестве с антисемитской Всероссийской фашистской партией.

Ключевые слова: Япония; Маньчжоу-Го; еврейская диаспора; Харбин; Всероссийская фашистская партия.

Introduction

The 20th century witnessed transformative events including the Russian Revolution, Russo-Japanese War, and World War II. These conflicts changed the course of global history. Harbin's Jewish community, examined here, reflects this wider context. Investigating the poli-

cies of the Japanese authorities toward this community offers valuable insight into this turbulent period.

Currently, no dedicated monographs on this subject exist in China or Belarus. Several broader studies, however, provide essential context. Belarusian expert

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Автор:

Мэн Тяньсян – аспирант кафедры истории нового и новейшего времени исторического факультета. Научный руководитель – кандидат исторических наук, доцент А. А. Кондраль.

Author:

Meng Tianxiang, postgraduate student at the department of modern and contemporary history, faculty of history.
mengtianxiang99@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5780-6839>

on Russian diaspora history N. Ablova authored the work «From the history of Russian-Jewish emigration in China» [1]. As a key chapter in the book «Jewish emigration from Russia. 1881–2005», her work reconstructs the development of the Russian-Jewish diaspora in China and provides essential contextual evidence. I. Kovalchuk-Koval's Russian-language memoir «The date with memory» [2] offers eyewitness accounts of Jewish life in Harbin under Japanese authorities and Russian fascists, supplying valuable primary material.

Other works specifically explore the relationship between Russian fascism and Japanese authorities during this period. John J. Stephan's study «The Russian fascists: tragedy and farce in exile, 1925–1945» [3], E. Oberländer's article «The All-Russian fascist party» [4], S. Hohler's research «Fascism in Manchuria: the Soviet-China encounter in the 1930s» [5], and A. Vespa's book «Secret agent of Japan» [6] all document the dual persecution suffered by Harbin's Jews as an expression of antisemitic policy. B. Bresler's work «Harbin's Jewish community, 1898–1958: politics, prosperity, and adversity» [7] – written by a Russian-Jewish scholar raised in Harbin – provides a coherent account of the community's development. Japanese researcher Chizuko Takao contributes further perspectives through the articles «Russian-Jewish Harbin before World War II» [8] and «Prewar Japan's perception of Jews and the Harbin Jewish community» [9], analysing Japan's policies in the region in 1932–1941.

Son of A. J. Kaufman, Harbin Jewish leader, whose name is T. Kaufman provides compelling primary material in his memoir «The Jews of Harbin live on in my heart» [10]. The research of T. D. Dubois «Rule of law in a brave new empire: legal rhetoric and practice in Manchukuo» [11] analyses the legal framework enforced by Japanese authorities, presenting a legal perspective on their policies toward the Jewish community. The monograph

of H. Dicker «Wanderers and settlers in the Far East: a century of Jewish life in China and Japan» [12] adds important supplementary data on the diaspora's livelihoods, career paths, and religious life. Liu Shuang's book «History of the Jewish diaspora in Harbin» [13] presents a local perspective, enriching the analysis with information on the community's economic and cultural integration into the city.

This study aims to outline the main policies and mechanisms applied by the Japanese authorities toward Harbin's Jewish community between 1931 and 1937 and to assess the effects of these measures on the community itself. Objectives of the study are following:

1) to analyse Japanese policies addressing the identity of Harbin's Jewish community, focusing on the establishment of the Bureau for Russian Emigrants (BREM) and collaboration with the All-Russian fascist party;

2) to examine the nature and extent of collaboration between Japanese authorities and the All-Russian fascist party in persecuting Harbin's Jews, including the Simon Kasper affair and other antisemitic crimes;

3) to investigate the repressive measures used by Japanese authorities against Jewish community protests, such as targeting leaders and applying economic pressure on Jewish businesses;

4) to assess the political, legal, economic, and social consequences of these policies on Harbin's Jewish community during 1931–1937.

The author draws on Soviet policy archives from the Digital library of historical documents of the Russian Federation and original materials from the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. Methodologically, it adopts a comparative and transnational approach. Quantitative data including demographics and business losses supplements discourse analysis of propaganda and suppression tactics. A post-modern, multi-causal framework reveals how Harbin's Jewish diaspora suffered persecution on multiple fronts.

Policies for Jewish identity

The construction and operation of the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER) created a unique state within a state in Manchuria – the CER alienation zone. From 1903 to 1920, it was known as happy Croatia after CER director D. L. Horvat. His administration fostered an unusual degree of national and religious tolerance. The Jewish diaspora in Harbin and the CER alienation zone thrived without violence or persecution. By the early 1920s, Harbin had become the Far East's largest Jewish centre, earning titles such as the Jerusalem of the Far East and Eastern Zion [1, p. 168–170].

Even before Japan occupied northeastern China in 1931 and established Manchukuo in 1932, Jewish identity in Harbin was already contested. One outcome of the

October Revolution was the Soviet government's 1921 revocation of citizenship for political exiles, which left many stateless¹. This decision imposed new restrictions on Jews who had fled Russia seeking safety and opportunity in Harbin. Consequently, the children of these stateless migrants were also classified as persons without nationality in China, a status that often led to their gradual incorporation into Chinese citizenship. Under the Nationality law of the Republic of China, individuals aged 20 or over (with some exceptions for stateless persons) who had lived continuously in China for five years, had previously resided for ten consecutive years, or were born on Chinese soil, could apply for naturalisation².

¹Agreement between the USSR and Manchukuo on the cession to Manchukuo of the rights of the USSR in relation to the Chinese Eastern Railway of 23 March 1935, as well as acts related to the agreement // Digital library of historical documents : website. URL: <https://docs.historyrussia.org/ru/nodes/350671> (date of access: 10.09.2024) (in Russ.).

²Nationality law of the Republic of China // Open object book : website. URL: <http://read.nlc.cn/OutOpenBook/OpenObjectBook?aid=416&bid=84689.0> (date of access: 27.08.2025) (in Chin.).

This situation also restricted prospects for emigration to countries with strict barriers against Asian arrivals. White Australia policy, for example, severely limited such movement³. Harbin's mid-1930s police records document approximately 7000 Jewish residents. Within this population, 4500 were stateless. Among those with citizenship documentation, 1200 held Soviet passports, 350 Polish, 160 Lithuanian, and 150 Chinese⁴.

Japan had allied with White Russian forces during the Russian Civil War, and this collaboration continued in Manchukuo. The BREM, founded in December 1934 by the Japanese military administration in Harbin, embodied this alliance. Senior positions in BREM were held by leading figures of K. Rodzaevsky's All-Russian fascist party. All Russians in Manchukuo were required to register their political, social, religious, educational, and cultural activities through BREM. For Russian Jewish emigrants, dealing with antisemitic officials during registration proved deeply troubling. Without a BREM card, securing employment became increasingly difficult [2, p. 125].

The Jewish diaspora in Harbin thus lost not only their nationality but also their legal identity. They became «double refugees», first from bolshevism and then from fascism. In both practical and legal terms, Jews experienced a complete erosion of identity and the stripping away of fundamental rights. This extended beyond inequality to economic, political, and religious obliteration.

Jewish possessions could be seized at will. Lives could be forfeited without consequence. Plundering and attacks against the community grew increasingly common [3, p. 176–177].

After Manchukuo's establishment, Japan employed various tactics to destabilise the CER's operations and increase pressure on the USSR. It repeatedly manufactured disputes, including the arrest of Soviet employees and staged incidents meant to heighten tension. This culminated in the 12 March 1935 agreement whereby the USSR sold the railway to Manchukuo. Under its terms, all Soviet personnel received dismissal compensation before repatriation⁵. This forced some Jewish railway workers and families in Harbin to return to the USSR.

Meanwhile, Soviet policies during the Great Purge worsened the diaspora's plight. On 20 September 1937, the Commissar of Internal Affairs issued Operational order No. 00593 concerning roughly 25 000 former Harbin residents in the USSR: «Most of this group are agents tied to Japanese intelligence; they have been sent repeatedly from Manchukuo to the USSR on espionage, sabotage, and terrorist missions»⁶ (translated by us. – *Meng Tianxiang*). Some returning Jews faced arbitrary execution or gulag imprisonment from the Soviet authorities, deterring remaining community members from repatriation.

Japanese cooperation with the All-Russian fascist party

As Japan strategically asserted control over northern Manchuria – historically within Russia's sphere of influence – the authorities took extreme measures. They arrested and expelled Soviet officials associated with the CER system. The slogan «Asia for Asians» provided rhetorical cover for these actions. Among the stateless refugees from Russia, a clear alliance existed between Japan's Kwantung Army and the Russian Fascist Party.

General Araki Sadao, noted for his staunch anti-communism within the Imperial Japanese Army, openly supported the party in direct opposition to the USSR. K. Rodzaevsky, head of the All-Russian fascist party and editor of the newspaper «Nash put'» («Our Path»), received strong support from Japanese authorities. His organisation became a useful instrument for consolidating Japanese control in Manchukuo [4].

From 1931, Harbin served as the main centre of the All-Russian fascist movement. Their publications – including the daily «Nash put'», periodical «Natsiya»

(«Nation»), and various pamphlets – disseminated anti-communist and antisemitic propaganda to strengthen White émigré nationalism. The propaganda closely resembled German nazi messaging, with «Azbuka Fashizma» («The ABCs of fascism») identifying two main enemies in its opening chapter: the Soviet state and the Jewish people [5, p. 51–52]. After Manchukuo's formation, party membership surged dramatically. Numbers grew from merely 200 in 1931 to approximately 5000 by 1933 – a 25-fold increase within two years [3, p. 89]. The party established a training school in Harbin by 1932, aligned with Japanese interests [4, p. 162].

Economic inequality between long-standing Harbin residents and later refugees, combined with overcrowding and limited employment, created severe hardship, especially for young people [3, p. 77–79]. Many people who joined the All-Russian fascist party turned to crime for money. The relatively affluent Jewish community, whom they resented, became prime targets for kidnapping.

³White Australia policy // National Museum of Australia. URL: <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/white-australia-policy> (date of access: 28.08.2025).

⁴Japanese Foreign Ministry Archives. File on the situation of nationalities of Former Russian subjects. D23028 (in Jpn.).

⁵Agreement between the USSR and Manchukuo on the cession to Manchukuo of the rights of the USSR in relation to the Chinese Eastern Railway of 23 March 1935, as well as acts related to the agreement // Digital library of historical documents : website. URL: <https://docs.historyrussia.org/ru/nodes/386047> (date of access: 18.09.2024) (in Russ.).

⁶Operational order of the NKVD of the USSR of 20 September 1937 No. 00593 «On the operation to repress former employees of the Chinese Eastern Railway and re-emigrants from Manchukuo» // Ibid. URL: <https://docs.historyrussia.org/ru/nodes/49318> (date of access: 12.09.2024) (in Russ.).

Police departments harboured criminal gangs specialising in kidnappings and extortion. Wealthy Jews in Manchukuo's major cities became frequent targets, forced to pay large ransoms for their release [6, p. 96].

Rough estimates suggest that about two-thirds of those abducted were Jews, and that one-third of all victims died, either executed or killed in captivity [7, p. 209]. Victims typically paid ransoms silently, recognising their captors often operated with police complicity. The police of the Japanese puppet regime routinely protected members of the All-Russian fascist party, as shown in the 1933 kidnapping at the hotel «Moderne», known as the Simon Kasper affair.

Japanese Gendarmerie interpreter Kostya Nakamura orchestrated this international scandal, recruiting Russian fascist leader K. Rodzaevsky and Harbin police inspector N. Martynov (who commanded 15 criminals) [6, p. 195–207]. After Simon Kasper's funeral, the All-Russian fascist party's newspaper «Nash put'» published 30 articles defaming Harbin's Jews [5, p. 138]. These articles appeared along Harbin's main commercial streets. When Jews tore down the posters and appealed to the police, officials refused to help. Their response made clear that the newspaper «Nash put'», like other news-

papers, operated under state supervision; the posters had official approval, and removing them was treated as a criminal act [5, p. 143–144].

In October 1934, six members of the All-Russian fascist party, including N. Martynov, were finally arrested. They went on trial before the Harbin District Court in March 1936. Four received death sentences, and two were given life imprisonment, although none of these penalties stood. In February 1937, Manchukuo's Supreme Court in Xinjing (Changchun) acquitted all defendants and deported them to Dairen, today's Dalian [8, p. 46–47]. N. Martynov resumed his duties as a Harbin municipal police inspector [3, p. 167].

The Japanese Gendarmerie also directed night-time attacks in which two Russian offenders repeatedly smashed the windows of local synagogues. Repairs proved futile as the attacks continued with stones and bricks until restoration efforts ceased. Congregations worshipped despite broken windows, enduring temperatures of -30°C [6, p. 230]. On the night of 1 March 1934, the New Synagogue on Diagonalnaia Street was thoroughly wrecked, its windows completely destroyed. By dawn, the building was unfit for use, and services were suspended due to unbearable cold [5, p. 154].

Repression of Jewish protests

The murder of Simon Kasper by Russian fascists in December 1933 provoked anger across Harbin's Jewish community and among many other residents. His funeral became an unprecedented public event. Multi-ethnic mourners accompanied the hearse to the Jewish cemetery, chanting «Death to Japanese militarists!». Jewish-owned shops across the city closed for the day. Fearing escalation, authorities reinforced local police with 250 Japanese gendarmes and an infantry regiment from Tsitsihar [6, p. 208]. Meanwhile, the newspaper «Manshu nippo» («The Manchurian Daily News») criticised the disruption caused by the procession and the resulting commercial closures [8, p. 56].

As the procession passed the New Synagogue, A. J. Kaufman, the Zionist leader of Harbin's Jewish community, addressed the mourners. He declared: «The Jewish people were the first in the world to proclaim the commandment “Thou shalt not kill”. We do not seek vengeance, but demand legal protection for life and property. The state authorities have an obligation to establish peace. The Japanese military and Manchukuo authorities must crack down on and eradicate those bandits who incite public hatred toward Jews and sow discord among citizens» [9, p. 40]. The newspaper «Manshu nippo» reported on A. J. Kaufman's outspoken anti-Manchukuo remarks made publicly on the street. This drew sharp criticism from right-wing newspapers in Harbin, which condemned A. J. Kaufman for opposing the Manchukuo authorities.

At a public gathering of the Jewish community, A. J. Kaufman delivered another forceful speech [5, p. 141]. He declared that any nation permitting bandits and assassins to harm innocent people had no right to exist [10, p. 114]. In Manchukuo, questioning the regime's legitimacy was treated as a serious political offence. The police had broad authority to arrest anyone suspected, even vaguely, of «state sabotage» [11, p. 300].

This brought A. J. Kaufman considerable trouble. The Imperial Japanese Army's Tokumu Kikan intelligence agency summoned A. J. Kaufman. Agents subjected him to intense verbal abuse and threatened expulsion from Manchukuo [6, p. 208].

In late winter 1934, Japanese authorities forced A. J. Kaufman and Harbin Jewish Council (HEDO) leaders to recant their previous positions and affirm Manchukuo's legitimacy. On 8–10 March 1934 A. J. Kaufman and HEDO published open letters in the Jewish newspaper «Rupor» («Horn») and in the Russian-language newspaper under Japanese control «Kharbinskoe vremia» («Harbin Time»). In these statements, A. J. Kaufman explicitly withdrew any previous criticisms of law enforcement or government integrity. The letters praised the handling of kidnappings by local police and expressed gratitude for the equal treatment of all citizens regardless of ethnicity or religion. The communiqués urged Harbin's Jewish residents to remain calm and conduct themselves peacefully [5, p. 142].

In February 1935, a delegation from the American Jewish Congress met with Japanese Ambassador Yoshi Saito in Washington, urging an investigation into allegations against the Japanese administration in Manchukuo and advising the government to protect Harbin's Jewish residents from potential provocations. Similarly, Jewish delegations from Shanghai approached the American Consul General and the British Minister in Manchukuo, seeking protection for Harbin's Jews. Meanwhile, the Japanese officials in Manchukuo, determined to dominate commerce, pressured Harbin's Jewish businesses to liquidate. Japanese traders frequently became buyers. Jewish merchants resisting forced transfers saw their lives and property threatened⁷.

In March 1935, Morishima Morito, the Japanese Consul General in Harbin, invited A. J. Kaufman and I. Berkovich, a member of the Harbin Jewish community presidium⁸. Amid rising antisemitic unrest, Morishima Morito assured local Jewish leaders of the government's goodwill towards Jews. He expected these leaders to promote a favourable view of Japan among Jewish communities abroad⁹. Displeased by negative reports of anti-Jewish sentiment in foreign media, he requested a list of Jews who had expressed complaints externally [5, p. 156].

The Japanese authorities soon retaliated. Seeking to counter criticism from abroad, Japanese authorities initiated covert police actions in mid-1935. They targeted prominent Jewish institutions, including the

Great Synagogue, which was surrounded by police and subjected to an exhaustive search. Officers inspected drawers, boxes and even the Holy Ark containing the Torah scrolls, looking for weapons and prohibited literature. Soon after these incidents, and coinciding with Yom Kippur, the harassment intensified. Police raided other sites, including Rabbi Levin's home and the residence of A. J. Kaufman [5, p. 157].

By late 1935, the Jewish community in Harbin faced severe repression. Attacks occurred daily in the streets, yet victims rarely reported them. Many feared arrest by the military police and confinement in cellars where detainees were allegedly held indefinitely and tortured. These assaults continued with the tacit support of the Manchukuo police¹⁰.

Economic repression was equally severe. Until 1932, Jewish businesses had been central to Harbin's commercial life: non-Soviet Russians and Russian Jews controlled 33 % of the city's trade, whilst the Japanese held only 8 %. By 1934, nearly all major Jewish firms were either Japanese-controlled or forced into joint operations. Japanese interests monopolised shipbuilding, soy processing, and flour milling. Authorities reorganised the grain exchange, compelling Harbin Exchange president Y. Kabalkin to resign. Between 1932 and 1936, over 30 Jewish shops closed with 1.961 million yuan losses. By 1939, Japanese-funded enterprises controlled 12 % of core industries and 30 % of trade [12 p. 42–43; 13, p. 75].

Conclusions

Japanese policy toward Harbin's Jewish diaspora between 1931 and 1937 involved systematic persecution, violent repression, and economic exploitation, carried out largely in partnership with the antisemitic All-Russian fascist party.

First, Japanese authorities institutionalised discrimination by establishing the BREM, linked to K. Rodzavsky's fascists. This required Russian immigrants to register with the fascist-controlled bureau, forcing Jews to obtain documents from antisemitic officials. BREM stripped Harbin's Jewish diaspora of legal protection, rendering them double refugees – stateless under Soviet policy and legally exposed under Japanese rule. This denied them fundamental rights.

Second, Japanese authorities actively collaborated with the All-Russian fascist party. They permitted the publication of extremist antisemitic propaganda like the newspapers «Nash put'» and «Natsiya», which identified Jews alongside the USSR as primary enemies. Manchukuo police, controlled by Japan, further collaborated

with Russian fascists by providing judicial immunity for antisemitic crimes. Inspector N. Martynov of the Harbin Municipal Police directly participated in the 1933 Simon Kaspe affair. Though six Russian fascists received initial sentences in 1936, the Supreme Court overturned these in 1937. They released all convicts, and N. Martynov resumed his police duties.

Finally, Japan suppressed Jewish resistance in Harbin. Authorities deployed 250 gendarmes and an infantry regiment to quell protests at Simon Kaspe's funeral in December 1933. Notably, the Imperial Japanese Army's Tokumu Kikan intelligence agency summoned Jewish leader A. J. Kaufman, threatening him over critical remarks. They compelled him to publicly praise Manchukuo officials, urge restraint, and acknowledge «satisfactory» police handling of the kidnappings. Following American and British Jewish protests in 1935, Japan implemented policies dismantling Jewish religious and economic activities. By late 1935, Harbin's Jewish community faced comprehensive repression.

⁷Events in review // Jewish Telegraphic Agency : website. URL: <https://www.jta.org/archive/events-in-review-5> (date of access: 20.09.2024).

⁸World press digest // Ibid. URL: <https://www.jta.org/archive/world-press-digest-71> (date of access: 20.09.2024).

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