

**The Three Empires' Border.  
Imperial Practices, Knowledge Transfer, and  
Everyday Experiences of Borders in East-Central Europe, 1815–1921**

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This paper examines the establishment of border regimes and forms of modern migration control along the Russian-Austrian-Prussian/German border, from 1815 to 1921. Following the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the eighteenth century, Imperial Russia came to share, to the south, a border with Austria-Habsburg and, to the north, with Prussia (and from 1871 on with Imperial Germany).<sup>1</sup> Politically contested throughout its existence until the end of the First World War, the border cut through multiethnic and multi-lingual lands, in which the majority population was often Polish-speaking. Depending on the geographical location, other languages included Yiddish, German, Lithuanian, Ukrainian and other Slavic languages, as well as numerous dialects. From the second half of the nineteenth century on, millions of migrants passed the Russian-Habsburg-Prussian/German border on their way from east to west (and sometimes back, too), as part of the great transatlantic migration.<sup>2</sup>

This paper consists of two parts. The first part lays out the project's overarching, larger questions and provides an overview of the events and developments that shaped the management of migration and population control across and along the Russian-Austrian-Prussian/German border. My research project is still in its early stages – I have undertaken a first survey of the relevant literature and begun with archive research, but many questions are still open, leading into different directions. In a second step, the paper briefly zooms in on one place, the region around the city of Myslowitz/Mysłowice in Upper Silesia. Beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Myslowitz became one of the most important transit points for migrants from the Russian empire. It was also the site of a so-called “emigration control station” through which migrants had to pass on their transatlantic migration route. The paper looks at the increasing regulation of migration control in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the ways in which border control and health check-ups were inextricably linked to medical discourses and different political visions of space and population management.

### **Part I: Modern Border Regimes and the Age of Empire**

State borders are tools, constructs of the political imaginary. As the political boundaries that mark the territorial limits of state sovereignty, they are projections of territorial power that define inclusion and exclusion in symbolic and material ways. State borders require constant justification, guardianship, and maintenance – and border regimes, understood here as the whole range of institutional, administrative, legislative, and technical measures that are meant to ensure border security and control, reflect this only too well. The existence of borders often creates conflict as much as it results from it.<sup>3</sup> But state borders – as well as borderlands, their adjacent territories –

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<sup>1</sup> Wandycz, *The Lands of Partitioned Poland, 1795–1918*, Lukowski and Zawadzki. *A Concise History of Poland*.

<sup>2</sup> Zahra, *The Great Departure*, 35.

<sup>3</sup> Important theoretical and historiographical discussions on political borders include: Conklin Akbari et al., “AHR Conversation: Walls, Borders, and Boundaries in World History,” 1501–53; Newman, “On Borders and Power,” 13–25; Paasi, “A Border Theory,” 11–31; Newman, “Contemporary Research Agendas in Border Studies,” 33–47.

can also be sites of political, social, economic, and cultural encounters, places of interaction and transfer, with ever changing dynamics of migration, communication, and circulation.<sup>4</sup> Borders make visible the extent to which states can regulate individual cross-border mobility; as such, they reflect global inequalities and state power in concrete ways. Yet non-state actors and non-elites, local residents, nomads, or migrants frequently challenge territorialization efforts and border regimes; in that sense, borders attest to the limits of state power, too.<sup>5</sup>

Although the history of state borders goes back centuries, it was in the nineteenth and early twentieth century that the process of border-making acquired a different kind of intensity, as European states like France, Britain, Germany, Russia, and others annexed territories in Africa, Asia, Eurasia, and the Pacific at an unprecedented rate. They also aspired to draw more rigid boundaries around the lands that they formally ruled over. In continental Europe itself, the number of smaller, independent political units declined noticeably as states sought to homogenize their administrative structures. At the same time, the world witnessed not only increasing interconnectedness, due to new means of communication and transport. It also saw the rise of nationalism as a political force – and subsequently the formation of modern nation-states (although most were a hybrid of empire and nation-state). Their emergence was shaped by the idea that political boundaries should be congruent with ethnic and linguistic ones.<sup>6</sup> This, then, was the historical context in which the system of border regimes as we know them today emerged. New (and often violent) techniques of border surveillance and management, the legislative and administrative regulation of international migration, and the growth of standardized identity documents – these measures have their roots in the Age of Empire.

In the scholarly literature, the development of modern border regimes has been interpreted in different ways. Some scholars have viewed them as a backlash to nineteenth-century globalization, in particular due to shifts in the global labor market.<sup>7</sup> Others have stressed the impact of nationalism. In his study on the invention of the passport, John Torpey has argued that it was the emergence of nation-states in Western Europe and the United States that led to the development of stricter border controls and the proliferation of identity documents, as these states strove to create homogenous ethno-cultural units.<sup>8</sup> More recent scholarship, though, has called for a reassessment of these views. In his book on the restrictions that white settler nations in the Pacific and the Atlantic imposed on Chinese migration, Adam McKeown has argued that the system of modern border and migration control emerged not as a countermeasure to globalization. On the contrary: the flows of information and power that helped to establish means of border and

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<sup>4</sup> On borderlands, see the seminar articles by Baud and Van Schendel, “Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands,” 211–42; Hämmäläinen and Truett, “On Borderlands,” 338–61; Adelman and Aron, “From Borderlands to Borders,” 814–41; Sahlins, *Boundaries*.

<sup>5</sup> As shown, most recently by Park, *Sovereignty Experiments*, Urbansky, *Beyond the Steppe Frontier*; Yeh, *Passing*.

<sup>6</sup> On territorialization: Maier, *Once Within Borders*, 2–11, 214–32; Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt*, 173–4, 565, 580–672. Specifically on Europe: Sheehan, “The Problem of Sovereignty,” 1–15. On globalization: Rosenberg (ed.), *A World Connecting, 1870–1945*; Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World*; Ballantyne and Burton, *Empires and the Reach of the Global*. The term “Age of Empire” is taken from Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914*.

<sup>7</sup> O’Rourke and Williamson, *Globalization and History*, 205–6.

<sup>8</sup> Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport*, 1–3. For a political science perspective, see: Salter, *Rights of Passage*.

migration control were “inseparable from the knowledge and practices that facilitated and guaranteed the flows of goods and people in the first place.”<sup>9</sup>

The Central and East European empires, including the Russian empire, remain largely absent from these global history debates. This is not to say that scholars have thus far not interrogated the question of border regimes. On the contrary: My project builds on important studies that have examined the history of passports in the Russian empire, changes in citizenship law and mobility in the pre-1871 German states,<sup>10</sup> and borderlands and border towns in the Habsburg monarchy and Prussia.<sup>11</sup> It also builds on thriving scholarship on the regulation of the great transatlantic migration from Central and Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Yet analytically, scholarship remains largely confined within the frame of each individual state. If comparative or transnational approaches are applied, West European states like France and Britain or the United States still remain the standard point of reference.<sup>13</sup> Within scholarship on border regimes in the German empire or the Habsburg monarchy, few have systematically looked east; within scholarship on border regimes in the Russian empire, few have systematically looked outside of this vast empire.<sup>14</sup>

My project hopes to fill this gap by embarking on a trans-imperial analysis of the development of modern border regimes in those states that ruled over large parts of nineteenth and early twentieth-century Central and Eastern Europe: the Habsburg empire (Austria-Habsburg, from 1867 on Austria-Hungary), the Russian empire, and first Prussia, from 1871 on the German empire. Contested throughout its existence, the Russian-Austrian-Prussian/German border, it seems, served the three powers as a laboratory for the development of new techniques of border and population management, eventually becoming the most well-fortified border on the European continent at the time. I am particularly interested in questions of inter- and intra-imperial exchange and transfer. More specifically, I would like to find out to what extent border management techniques employed in colonial contexts (in German colonies in Africa, Russian-ruled Central Asia and the Caucasus), along military borders (in the south of Habsburg, pre-1881), or in newly incorporated territories (after 1878 in Habsburg-occupied and subsequently annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina) affected those employed along the Russian-Habsburg-Prussian/German border – and vice versa.

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted from McKeown, *Melancholy Order*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Chernukha, *Pasport v Rossii*; Lohr, *Russian Citizenship*; Fahrmeir, *Citizens and Aliens*.

<sup>11</sup> For the most important works, see: Adelsgruber, Cohen and Kuzmany (eds.), *Getrennt und doch verbunden*; Augustynowicz and Kappeler (eds.), *Die galizische Grenze*; Bakhturina, *Okrainy rossiiskoi imperii*; Heindl and Saurer, eds., *Grenze und Staat*; Karch, *Nation and Loyalty*; Kamusella, *Silesia*; Komlosy, *Grenze*; Kossert, *Ostpreußen*; Kuzmany, *Brody*; Labuda, *Polska*; Leiserowitz, *Sabbatleuchter*; Serrier, *Grenzregion*; Maner (ed.), *Grenzregionen*; Maner, *Galizien*; Sammartino, *The Impossible Border*; Struve and Ther (eds.), *Die Grenzen der Nationen*.

<sup>12</sup> These include: Brinkmann (ed.), *Points of Passage*; Brinkmann, “Why Paul Nathan Attacked Albert Ballin”; Brunnbauer, *Globalizing Southeastern Europe*; Cheboratov, “Jews from the East”; Just, *Ost- und südosteuropäische Amerikawanderung*; Kaltenbrunner, *Das global vernetzte Dorf*; Pilch, “Emigracja z ziem zaboru austriackiego”; Reinecke, *Grenzen der Freizügigkeit*; Zahra, *The Great Departure*.

<sup>13</sup> For a similar observation, see Fahrmeir, “Conclusion: Historical Perspectives,” 626.

<sup>14</sup> One notable exception is: Urbansky, *Beyond the Steppe Frontier*; see also the short reflections by Happel and Rolf, “Die Durchlässigkeit der Grenze,” 397–404. Bencsik, *Border Regimes*, has an important background chapter on the nineteenth century, but the focus of the work is on the twentieth century.

In pursuing this question, the project will engage with ongoing debates within German history that compare German imperialism on the continent itself (in the eastern parts of Europe) to German imperialism overseas.<sup>15</sup> As part of these debates, historians have argued that political imaginations of the “East” in nineteenth-century Prussia and later Imperial Germany should be analyzed within a colonial framework, as representations of an increasingly racist discourse of a German continental “civilizing mission” vis-à-vis Slavs and Jews.<sup>16</sup> Others have cautioned that the same cannot be said for the Habsburg empire, which operated less on nationalist principles than the German empire – although more recent scholarship has begun to call for a reassessment of that view, too, pointing out that notions of civilizational superiority permeated how German-speaking elites spoke about the Slavic and Muslim populations in Austrian-ruled Galicia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, respectively.<sup>17</sup> The case of the Russian empire is likewise more complicated, but for different reasons. In the scholarly literature on empire, there is widespread consensus that modern colonies (the product of nineteenth-century colonialism) were based on the construction of a racial difference and hierarchies of political rights that were based on notions of cultural superiority, which were then contrasted with local “backwardness.”<sup>18</sup> Yet in the nineteenth-century Russian empire, several of its domains – including its western regions – did not neatly fit this description. While St. Petersburg responded fiercely and violently to Polish insurrections and employed administrative russification measures to curtail the influence of Polish culture, its general policy vis-à-vis the population in its western regions was not informed by notions of civilizational hierarchy.<sup>19</sup> However, once St. Petersburg expanded into the Caucasus and Central Asia in the nineteenth century, its practices in these regions closely began to resemble that of its European rivals overseas: these were driven by the racist belief in European cultural superiority, the need to “civilize” the “backward” local populations, and the legal construction of a rule of difference – features that scholars consider to be characteristic of modern colonial conduct.<sup>20</sup>

Connecting these debates to the Russian-Habsburg-Prussian/German border, my research project asks if border regimes that were established in modern colonial contexts (such as Russian-ruled Central Asia or German Southwest Africa) differ from those elsewhere within an empire, for example from borderlands such as Habsburg-ruled Galicia or the Russian western regions that defy easy categorization as colonies?<sup>21</sup> Where did European border regimes also contribute to or go hand in hand with colonial practices and discourse – and where and why was that not the case?

## **Part II: The “Three Empire’s Corner”: Myslowitz/Myslowice**

This part of the paper provides a brief overview of the events and developments that shaped the management of migration and population control across and along the Russian-Austrian-

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<sup>15</sup> Conrad, *Globalisierung*, 74–123; Lerp, *Imperiale Grenzräume*.

<sup>16</sup> Kopp, *Germany’s Wild East*; Thum, “Megalomania and Angst,” 42–60; Thum, “Die kulturelle Leere des Ostens,” 263–85; Ureña Valerio, *Colonial Fantasies, Imperial Realities*.

<sup>17</sup> For a cautious view: Zahra, “Looking East,” 1–23. For postcolonial approaches: Feichtinger, Prutsch and Csásky (eds.), *Habsburg postcolonial*; Kaps and Surman (eds.), *Postcolonial Galicia*.

<sup>18</sup> Stoler and Cooper, “Between Metropole and Colony,” 1–56.

<sup>19</sup> On Russia’s western regions: Weeks, *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia*, 11–69.

<sup>20</sup> On Russian conduct in the Caucasus and Central Asia: Bassin, “Geographies of Imperial Identity,” 49, 59; Khodarkovsky, *Bitter Choices*; Morrison, *Russian Conquest*.

<sup>21</sup> On borders in German colonies in Africa (and border conflicts above all with the British empire): Lindner, *Koloniale Begegnungen*; Miescher, *The Red Line*; Nugent, *Boundaries*.

Prussian/German border. In a second step, I zoom in on one particular place at the border, the region around the city of Myslowitz/Mysłowice in Upper Silesia.

The international boundary between the Russian empire, Austria-Habsburg and Prussia (from 1871 on Imperial Germany) was a result of the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the eighteenth century. After some back and forth, including the Napoleonic Wars and the 1807–1815 Duchy of Warsaw interlude, the three states' international boundary was established at the Congress of Vienna in 1814–1815. In the spring of 1815, Austria and Russia concluded a “Treaty on Poland.” On the same day, Prussia and Russia also concluded a “Treaty on Poland,” which, among others, established the exact course of the border. With the exception of the Free City of Kraków, which from 1815 until its annexation by Austria in 1846 formed a small triangle between the three borders, that border lasted for more than a century, until the First World War witnessed the dissolution of these three European empires.<sup>22</sup>

The development of the modern passport system can be traced back to the French Revolution. In contrast to earlier systems, throughout Europe passports now became compulsory for all international travelers. Passports ceased to be semi-personal letters of recommendation and rank whose usefulness was tied to the status of the recommender. Instead, they became increasingly standardized documents that attested to a person's citizenship and that were issued by bureaucrats in the name of a state.<sup>23</sup> Apart from the passport, issued by one's own state, cross-border travel also required a visa, issued by the state to which a person intended to travel. At the same time, the social status of a person continued to be of importance. Prussia, for example, usually privileged elite foreign travelers, who therefore neither needed a visa to enter Prussia nor were required to be registered locally. Indeed, not everyone was eligible to receive a passport in the first place. In the case of the Russian empire, for example, serfdom (in place in large parts of the empire until its abolition in 1861) represented an important mechanism through which the state regulated (and limited) people's mobility. Two types of passports existed in the Russian empire: the “internal passport” (*vnutrennyi pasport*), introduced in 1719, which served to regulate internal migration, and the „international passport” (*zagranichnyi pasport*). The latter, however, was only valid for a single journey leaving the Russian empire; it was not a more permanent identification document.<sup>24</sup>

Saying that passports became compulsory for international travelers in nineteenth century Europe does not mean, however, that each state necessarily engaged in strict border controls. Rather, we can see variations in time and place. The Russian-Austrian-Prussian/German border, though, perhaps constituted somewhat of an exception. During the second half of the nineteenth century, it had become the most well-fortified border on the European continent at the time.<sup>25</sup> The major reason for that were the series of Polish insurrections that recurrently shook the Russian, Prussian, and Austrian-ruled parts of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (in 1830, 1846, 1848

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<sup>22</sup> The Kingdom of Poland, also called Congress Poland, was initially semi-autonomous, connected to the Russian empire in a personal union. In practice, however, it was from the beginning under the control of St. Petersburg, which only strengthened throughout the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While a customs border existed between the Kingdom of Poland and the rest of the Russian empire, the international boundary was between Imperial Russia, Austria-Habsburg, and first Prussia, from 1871 on Imperial Germany. Lukowski and Zawadzki. *A Concise History of Poland*.

<sup>23</sup> Torpey, *Invention of the Passport*; Fahrmeir, “Passport and the Status of Aliens,” 95–6.

<sup>24</sup> Lohr, *Russian Citizenship*.

<sup>25</sup> On the border's fortification: Fahrmeir, “Passports and the Status of Aliens,” 99.

and 1863). Seeking to prevent the cross-border spread of revolutionary ideas, from 1830 on the three states had guards and soldiers stationed on each side, who closely patrolled the border.<sup>26</sup>

Another development that shaped border regimes along the Russian-Austrian-Prussian/German border was the increase in emigration and immigration following the 1864 naturalization reform in the Russian empire as well as the 1867 lifting of emigration restrictions in the Habsburg empire.<sup>27</sup> Toward the end of the century, the number of people emigrating from the Russian empire and from the Galician part of the Austria empire increased significantly. As part of the great transatlantic migration, millions of people passed the border into the German empire, traveling onwards to ports in northern Germany and England. In addition, seasonal migration, although increasingly restricted by the Prussian government, continued to make up a large part of cross-border travel. In 1908, for example, 8.6 million people (of these 6 million Russian subjects) left the Russian empire through its European borders, whereas 8.5 million (of these 5.9 million Russian subjects) travelled to the Russian empire. Many of those who left the Russian empire were permanent emigrants (the majority Jews, followed by ethnic Poles), yet many were also seasonal or labor migrants, especially from the westernmost parts of the Russian empire to Prussia, who crossed the border more than once each year.<sup>28</sup>

This is where the “Three Emperors’ Corner” comes into the story, a tripoint at the confluence of the Black and White Przemsza rivers near the town of Myslowitz (today’s Mysłowice) in Prussian Upper Silesia.<sup>29</sup>

Below: Postcard ca. 1907 depicting the “Three Emperors’ Corner” in Upper Silesia



Central and Eastern Europe ca. 1910

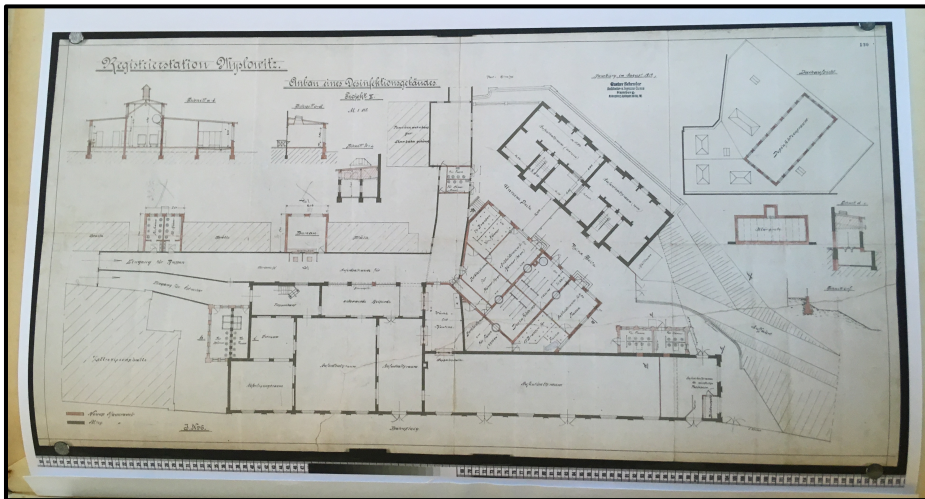
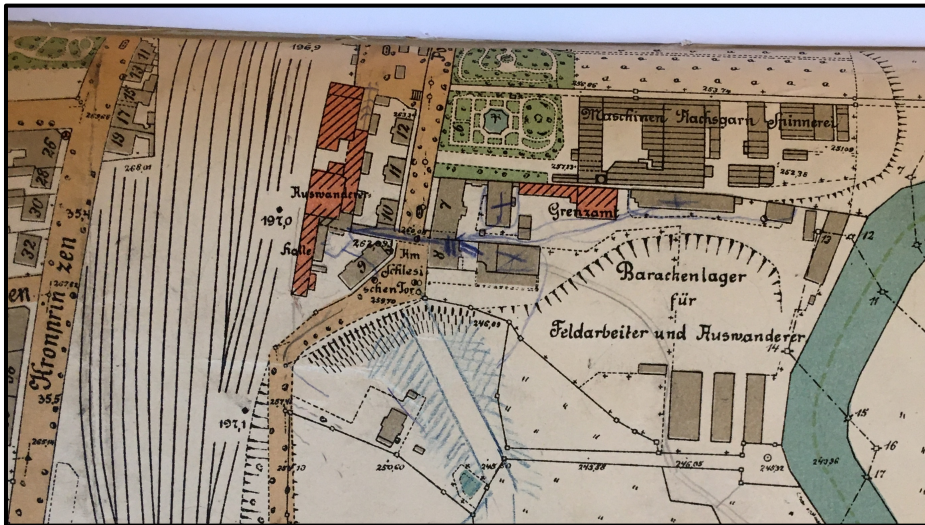
<sup>26</sup> Fahrmeir, *Citizens and Aliens*.

<sup>27</sup> On the reforms: Becker, “Governance of Migration,” 33; Lohr, *Russian Citizenship*, 53; Chernukha, *Passport v Rossii*.

<sup>28</sup> Lohr, *Russian Citizenship*, 47–50, 89–99, 198–9; Zara, *The Great Departure*, Just, *Ost- und südosteuropäische Amerikawanderung*.

<sup>29</sup> *Trójkąt Trzech Cesarzy/Dreikaisereck or Dreikaiserreichsecke/Ugol trekh imperatorov*. Sulik, *Historia Mysłowic*; Pochmara, *Z Dziejów Mysłowic*, 51–63.

From 1871 to 1918, the “Three Emperors’ Corner” marked the place at which the international border of the three empires met. The local population on the three sides of the border mostly spoke Polish, Yiddish, German, and Silesian. On the German side, the authorities built a Bismarck tower, a nationalistic symbol that commemorated the founding of the German empire and that served as a platform from which visitors could look to the “East.”<sup>30</sup> Myslowitz was also a major border crossing between the Russian empire and first Prussia, later Imperial Germany; a major border crossing between the Russian empire and the Habsburg empire was located in the nearby town Granica. In 1894/95, the shipping company North German Lloyd built a so-called emigration control station in Myslowitz, which also operated a sanitary checkpoint for migrants on their route to the Americas, located right next to the check-point for seasonal migrants (see below).



Plans to further expand the Myslowitz train station sanitary checkpoints, 1912. Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz (GStA PK) I. HA Rep. 77 Ministerium des Inneren, Tit. 226 Nr. 139, Bd. 2

<sup>30</sup> Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz (GStA PK) I. HA Rep. 195 Deutscher Ostmarkenverein Nr. 67, Blatt 134.

The creation of these “emigration control stations” were part and parcel of a more general trend to regulate international migration. Yet they were also the product of a confluence of heightened nationalism, racism, and medical discourses that linked the outbreak of the Cholera in Western Europe in 1892 and again in 1905 to emigration from the “East”, that is, from the Russian empire. Following the Cholera outbreak in Hamburg in 1892, Imperial Germany temporarily closed its eastern border for emigrants from the Russian empire and the Galician part of Austria-Hungary – but only for those traveling on the steamships who had tickets for the third or fourth class, not for those who held first or second-class tickets for the passage to the Americas. The North German and British shipping companies feared that the partial border closing would severely impact their business, and representatives of the Hamburg-based HAPAG and the Bremen-based North German Lloyd lobbied the Prussian government to lift these restrictions. They eventually were able to broker a deal with the authorities, leading to the creation of several “emigration control stations” on the German side of the border. The Prussian government effectively outsourced these to the two shipping companies, who covered all costs and who operated the control stations together with the local police.<sup>31</sup> As part of the border crossing, emigrants had to undergo medical checkups. After their papers had been checked, the men and women (but again only those who held third or fourth-class tickets) were taken to separate rooms, where they had to undress, clean themselves (or in the language of the sources, to be “disinfected”) and then be inspected by a medical doctor. If they passed, they were put onto trains that took them to another emigration control station in Berlin-Ruhleben, where they had to undergo another round of check-ups and “disinfection” before finally being allowed to continue to the ports in Hamburg or Bremen.<sup>32</sup>

In lieu of a proper conclusion, one aspect that I seek to research further is the connection between political and medical discourses on the origins of epidemics in the European colonies in Africa, on the one hand, and the images that circulated in Germany (and Central Europe) of Jews and Slavs as supposedly potential carriers of disease, on the other hand. As Lenny Ureña Valerio has shown, such overlapping images can, for example, be found in the writings and speeches of Robert Koch, a German medical expert who is considered one of the main founders of modern bacteriology, and who travelled widely for his research throughout the eastern provinces of Prussia and German colonies in Africa. How did this play out in the case of the Myslowitz emigration control station; was its operational design influenced by the intra-imperial circulation of medical knowledge and practices acquired and applied in overseas colonies?<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Reinecke, *Grenzen der Freizügigkeit*; Brinkmann, “Why Paul Nathan Attacked Albert Ballin,” 47–83.

<sup>32</sup> Reinecke, *Grenzen der Freizügigkeit*.

<sup>33</sup> Ureña Valerio, *Colonial Fantasies, Imperial Realities*.



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