

RUSSIA AND BLACK AMERICA

Lecture Three

Frederick Bruce Thomas's Cross-continental Journey

March 12, 2024

The long nineteenth and short twentieth centuries.
Frederick Bruce Thomas lived in both



1789-1914



1914-1989 (or 1991)

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 was the hinge event of the twentieth century, whether we use the calendric definition or the imaginative, “short” one



During the Russian civil war Odessa, formerly known as the Marseille of the Russian Empire, was occupied by French troops (Dec. 1918-April 1919)



The topoi, or universal stages, of Thomas's life

Born into comfortable circumstances but family reduced to poverty

Childhood and youth overshadowed by evil men who did their worst

First time in the big city (this topos occurs repeatedly)

Succession of low-paying jobs

Meets a mentor or sage

Marriage and children

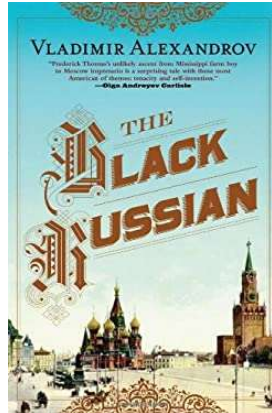
Career success

Loses it all owing to a world-historical catastrophe

Reinvents himself for a second time

Dies in poverty and obscurity but, as it turns out, is not forgotten

Vladimir Alexandrov is a scholar — and storyteller



See his interviews about *The Black Russian* such as this 2014 appearance on *The MacMillan Report*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9U94rbu5UCk>

The Russian Civil War (1918-1920)



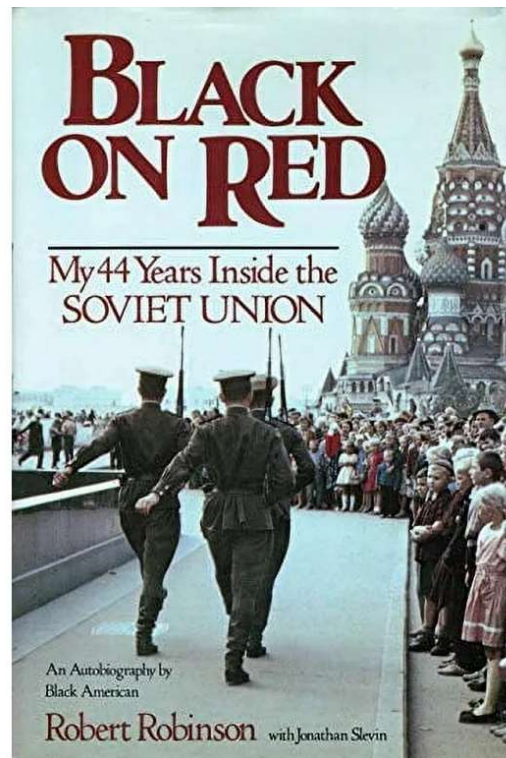
L: an internal passport of a subject of the Russian Empire ca. 1914; R: a US passport of the same vintage



Coahoma County, MS



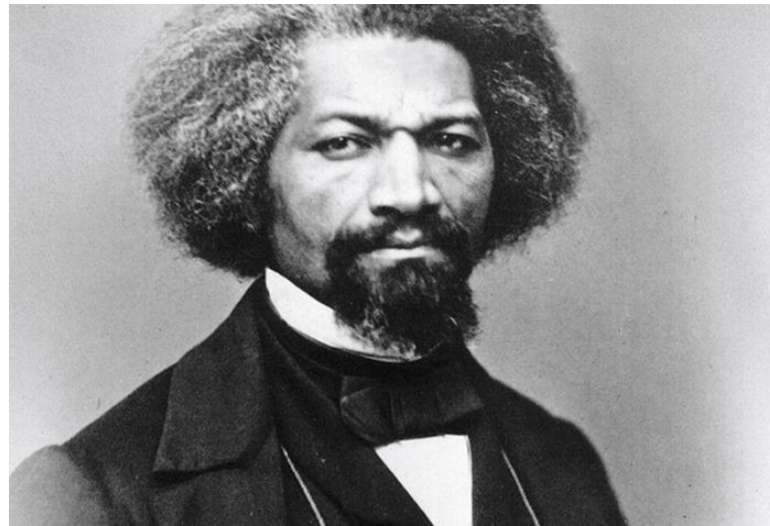
“Little is known about Lewis and Hannah before they bought their farm /in 1869/. Slaves wrote very few memoirs” (p. 4). Robert Robinson’s book, which we shall talk about in Week Six of this course, was one of the exceptions to the rule that autobiographies are authored by members of the writing classes



Sharecropping was a system of tenant farming where the landowner would provide the farmer with land, seeds, tools, clothing, and food. Landowners would deduct from the sharecroppers' portion of the harvest the cost of these supplies, which frequently left them with substantial and ever-increasing debts



Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), the Black American political leader and abolitionist after whom Thomas may have been named (p. 6). The most celebrated Black man in nineteenth-century America, Douglass was a charismatic figure who used his popular appeal to further the goals of African American liberation and racial justice



William H. Dickerson (pp. 13-23, 28-29) and Frank Shelton (pp. 25-28) were the villains of FBT's childhood and youth. Image below is of Memphis at the turn of the twentieth century



As a young man FBT witnessed the harsh realities of power in turn-of-the-twentieth-century America even as he took advantage of the opportunities created by early onset urban capitalism



The Auditorium Hotel, “the most important new building in Chicago” (p. 33), as it was when FBT worked there as a waiter



Today the Auditorium Building (corner of South Michigan Ave and Wabash) is owned by Roosevelt University. I find it exciting to learn about the history of physical spaces and objects, great or small, because it gives one's knowledge of the past a sense of directness and relevance



Erected in 1890, the New York World Building was, for a while, the highest structure in the city and even the world (the Eiffel Tower excepted), symbolizing the rising power and prominence of the East Coast metropolis. In fact, between 1890 – 1974 New York was always the home of the world's tallest edifice. The New York World Building was pulled down in 1955 to accommodate the expanded Brooklyn Bridge entrance ramp



FBT in New York. The Clarendon Hotel in Brooklyn, a “new, large, prominent, and strategically located establishment” (p. 35), where he was head bellboy. The building was demolished in 1953 to make way for Cadman Plaza



BROOKLYN EAGLE POST CARD, SERIES 27, No. 160.
CLARENDON HOTEL, JOHNSON AND WASHINGTON STS.

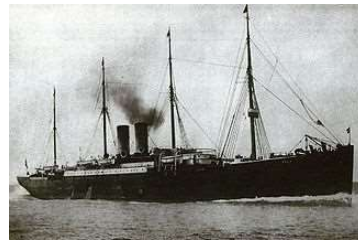
Cadman Plaza, Brooklyn today



Theatre entrepreneur Percy G. Williams (1857-1923) employed FBT as a valet. Like Thomas's German music teacher, Herman, he became a mentor



The *Lahn* was one of the new German express liners built for the Atlantic run. Globalization in the modern sense began in the late nineteenth century, with the time it took to cross from Southampton to New York falling from 10 days to just a week thanks to vessels like the *Lahn*



In 2024 the Southampton – London train journey takes the same couple of hours as it did when it was made by FBT in 1894: such are the sorrows of tired infrastructure. The Dover-Calais ferry he traveled on in the following year was also as fast, or slow, as the one today.

Image: London's Waterloo Station in the early twentieth century



London Bridge ca. 1900. In the British capital, Thomas pursued a variety of work opportunities



 alamy stock photo

CPKRR8
www.alamy.com

Thomas's next stage in his life's journey was Paris. The photo shows a view from the Pont Alexandre III, named after the Emperor of All the Russias



The Dreyfus Affair, which is mentioned on p. 53 of *The Black Russian*, was a political scandal in France in 1894-1906 that profoundly changed the country. It also gifted us the terms “nationalist” and “intellectual”



The Grand Hôtel Fontaine, Ostend, Belgium



The Hôtel des Anglais, Cannes, France



The Champs-Élysées in Paris, where the Restaurant Cuba was located



The Principality of Monaco ca. 1900



The Monte Carlo casino ca. 1900



Thomas's itinerary prior to, and after, meeting reporter William Drysdale in Monaco: New York — London — Paris — Brussels — Ostend — Cannes — Paris — Cologne — Dusseldorf — Berlin — Leipzig — Monte Carlo — Milan — Venice — Trieste — Vienna — Budapest — Moscow



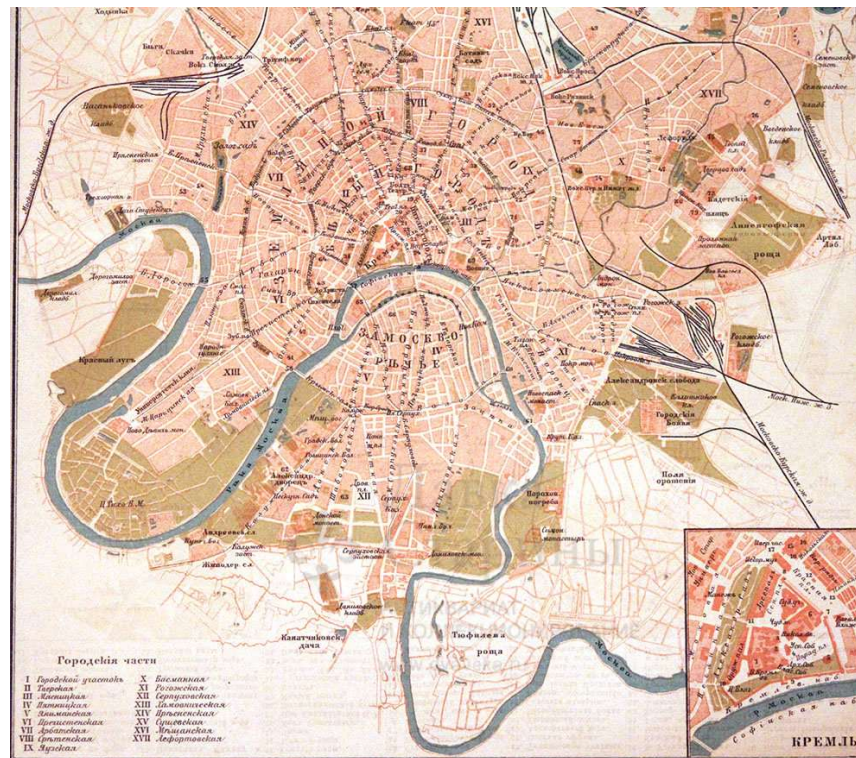
Emperor Nicholas II, who reigned 1896-1917.
Alexandrov dismisses the last Tsar of All the Russias as “weak” (p. 55), but that
characterization is not entirely fair



“The empire’s Slavic heartland was ringed by countries that the Russians had conquered or absorbed during the past centuries [...]” (p. 59)



“On a map, Moscow looks like a wheel” (p. 61)



Moscow ca. 1900



...and 2024



Moscow's Lutheran Church of Saints Peter and Paul, where Thomas married Hedwig Antonia Hähn in 1901



The Thomases' first home was in Chukhinsky Lane, now known as Krasina Lane



The site of the Aquarium Garden today. This “entertainment garden” (p. 63), where FBT was employed as a maître d’hôtel, was originally known as The Chicago



The Aumont Theater in the Aquarium Garden, named after its owner and FBT's employer, Charles Aumont. It was frequented by prominent personalities such as Grand Duke Sergey, the tsar's uncle and governor-general of Moscow



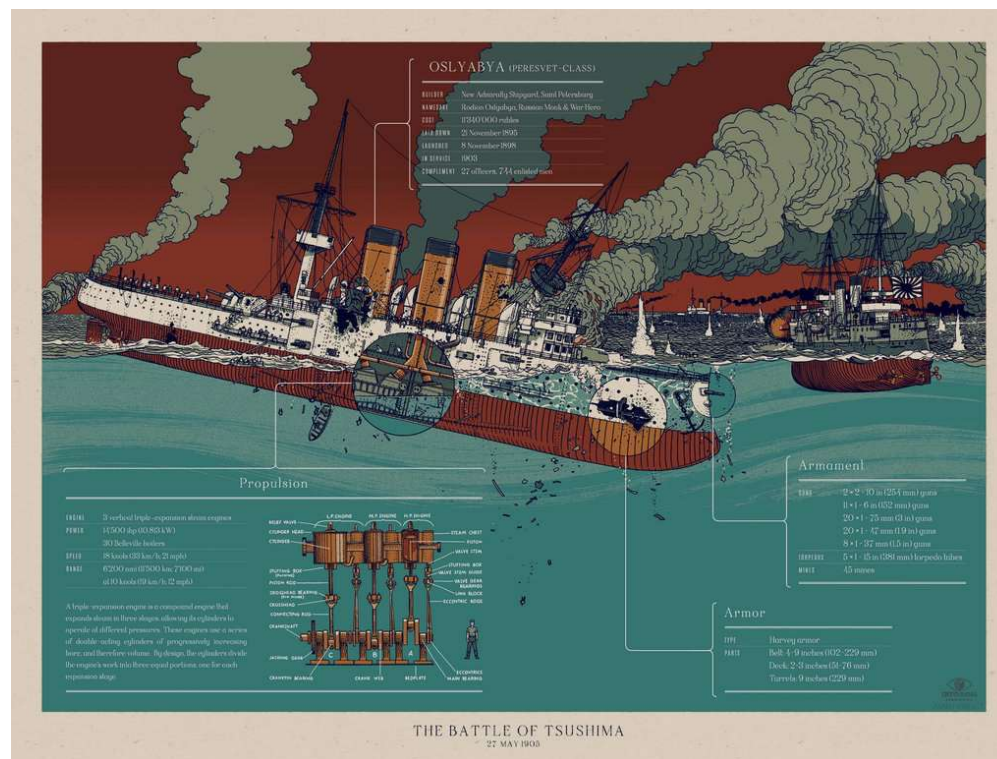
Grand Duke Sergei, a leading reactionary, was assassinated on February 4/17, 1905, shortly after he left the post of governor-general, by Ivan Kalyaev, a fanatical member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, then the leading extremist organization in the country



“[...] There were subterranean political forces at work [...], even if they were initially hardly noticeable to people like [Thomas] caught up in their daily lives” (p. 66).
Russia was undergoing rapid economic development, but the deepening crisis in its political and social system was coming to a head



The Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, which made the Empire of Japan one of the world's great powers but hastened the decline of the Russian Empire



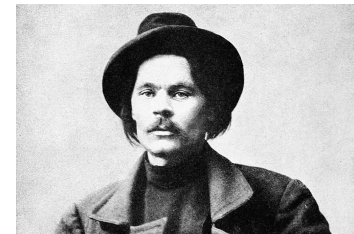
The First Russian Revolution of 1905-07 was provoked by the Bloody Sunday massacre of January 9/22, 1905



In Moscow, the revolution culminated in an armed uprising in the working-class Presnya district next door to the Aquarium (December 1905)



Aumont flees to France and FBT becomes maître d'hôtel at the Yar (building dates from 1910). The restaurant was frequented by celebrities such as the opera singer Fedor Chaliapin (1873-1938), the writer Maxim Gorky (1868-1936)...



...and the mystic, “mad monk,” and imperial family confidant Grigory Rasputin
(1869-1916)



Thanks to Rasputin, there were two degrees of separation between FBT and Emperor Nicholas II, and three degrees of separation between Thomas and President Vladimir Putin



Today the restored Yar restaurant is one of Moscow's most exclusive establishments. Just as when Thomas lived and worked in Russia's ancient capital, the city is setting "new standards for international hospitality" (p. 74). Even in times of war



Moscow's German (Vvedenskoe) Cemetery, where Hedwig, Thomas's first wife, was interred in 1910



Thomas and his business partners reopened the Aquarium in November 1911, two months after the assassination of prime minister Pyotr Stolypin



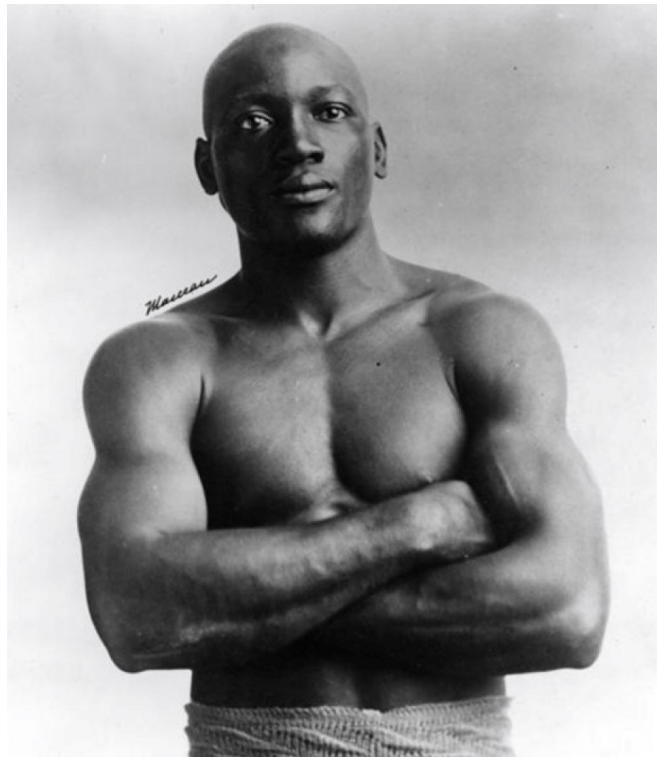
Cultural transfers and personal reinventions
What's in a patronymic?

“[...] Frederick [...] was now calling himself ‘Fyodor Fyodorovich Tomas’ [...]. [...] By adopting a Russian first name and patronymic, he was changing the very terms by which the world knew him” (pp. 79-80)

Malaya Bronnaya, 32, where Thomas and his second wife, Valli, lived in 1913-18, as it is today



Jack Johnson (1878-1946), the first African American heavyweight boxing champion of the world (see pp. 104-108). Johnson was in the habit of, in today's terms, trolling America's racists and hypocrites



The Battle of Tannenberg (August 1914), in which a numerically inferior German force crushed an invading Russian army, taking 92,000 prisoners, set the empire of Nicholas II on the road to defeat

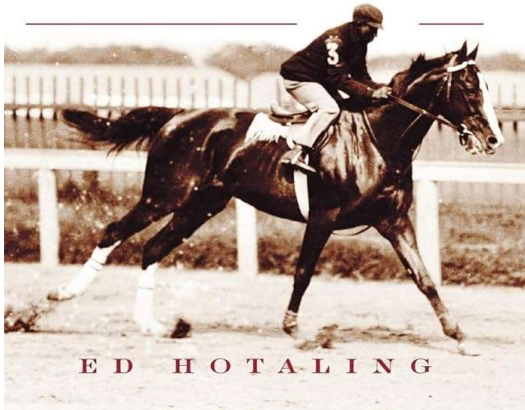


Jimmy “Wink” Winkfield (ca. 1880-1974)

“One of the most extraordinary stories in sports history.”
—LAURA HILLENBRAND, AUTHOR OF *SEABISCUIT*

Wink

THE INCREDIBLE LIFE
AND EPIC JOURNEY OF
JIMMY WINKFIELD



Josephine Baker (1906-1975)

