

SOLVED: THE MYSTERIOUS 30-DAY LOAN

A Foreign Exchange Transaction Reconstructed

Second Edition

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*An analytical companion to
R.M.S. Republic Cargo: Russian State Bank Shipment
(Version 3.2)*

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Note on Citations

Unless otherwise noted, citations throughout this paper refer to exhibits contained in *R.M.S. Republic Cargo: Russian State Bank Shipment*, Version 3.2 (“RSB Report”). Those exhibits reproduce the original archival documents, contemporary newspaper accounts, translations where applicable, and complete source references upon which this analysis is based. This paper is intended as an analytical companion to the RSB Report and focuses upon reconstructing the financial mechanics of the January–February 1909 bridge-loan transaction.

Research Development

Historical research seldom proceeds in a straight line. More often, each newly discovered document answers one question while raising another. The reconstruction of the Russian State Bank’s January 1909 bridge loan followed precisely that path.

When *The Tsar’s Treasure* was published in 2013, two disbursement instructions issued by the Imperial Russian Ministry of Finance had already been identified. Addressed to Crédit Lyonnais and Société Générale—two members of the predominantly French banking syndicate that organized Russia’s 1909 Conversion Loan—they directed each bank to transfer 5,000,000 francs to the Russian State Bank upon the February 22, 1909 disbursement of the loan (RSB Report, Exs. IV–VII et seq.).

Together, the two instructions accounted for 10,000,000 francs, or nearly two-thirds of the repayment required for the reported \$3,000,000 thirty-day New York bridge loan.

At that stage, however, the complete mechanics of the repayment had not yet been reconstructed.

The Tsar’s Treasure therefore concluded:

“The two disbursement orders, then, would account for nearly two thirds of the required repayment... it is reasonable to imagine that there might be a third disbursement order for another five million francs hidden away in a third bank’s archives.”

The discussion concluded:

“A third might exist, or it might have been lost to history.”

That conclusion accurately reflected the documentary record available in 2013.

Subsequent archival research identified the remaining Ministry instructions.

Rather than a single additional transfer of approximately 5,000,000 francs, the remaining balance proved to consist of 4,000,000 francs through Hottinguer and 1,500,000 francs through Banque de Paris et des Pays-Bas (Paribas), bringing the documented transfers to 15,500,000 francs.

The additional 500,000 francs was unexpected.

Rather than weakening the earlier research, it became the next question to answer.

The analytical reconstruction that follows is preserved substantially as originally written. The principal additions in this Second Edition consist of newly identified archival documents, exhibit citations, and historical context developed through subsequent research.

Among the most intriguing clues uncovered during the investigation of the Russian State Bank shipment appeared not in a government archive, but in the financial pages of New York newspapers.

On January 15, 1909, newspapers reported an extraordinary money-market transaction: a \$3,000,000 loan for thirty days at an annual interest rate of only 1½ percent. The following day, the *New York Tribune* and other financial publications expanded upon the story. Brokers interviewed by the *New York Times* stated that they could not recall a lower rate for a loan of comparable duration. The previous record for thirty-day money had reportedly been approximately 2½ percent (RSB Report, Ex. II).

The transaction was remarkable for its size, duration, and unusually favorable terms—the very reasons it attracted the attention of the financial press. A \$3,000,000 loan was enormous by the standards of the day. A thirty-day maturity was exceptionally short. An interest rate of only 1½ percent was virtually unprecedented. Yet neither the lender nor the borrower was identified.

At the time, no explanation was offered.

More than a century later, however, the transaction can now be traced to the financing mechanics of the Russian 4½% Conversion Loan of 1909 (RSB Report, Ex. I).

An Exact \$3,000,000 Requirement

The Russian conversion loan refinanced approximately \$150 million of maturing 1904 Russian government bonds. During the January 13–22 conversion period, holders of the old bonds exchanged them for newly issued 1909 bonds.

For the Russian State Bank, the arithmetic was exact.

A \$25,000,000 face-value block of maturing 1904 bonds exchanged for new 1909 bonds issued at 88 percent of face value produced \$22,000,000 in new bonds and a \$3,000,000 cash balance due during the conversion period (RSB Report, Exs. IV–V).

The conversion closed on January 22, 1909.

The problem was timing.

Although the conversion was complete, Russia would not receive the first installment of syndicate proceeds until February 22, 1909. The Russian State Bank therefore faced a precisely measured thirty-day liquidity gap. It required exactly \$3,000,000 during the conversion period but would not receive the corresponding proceeds for another month (RSB Report, Ex. XI).

A thirty-day bridge loan of exactly \$3,000,000 would solve the problem perfectly.

The February 22 Disbursement Instructions

The first evidence emerged from French banking archives. Instructions from the Russian Ministry of Finance directed Crédit Lyonnais and Société Générale to transfer 5,000,000 francs each to the Russian State Bank on February 22, 1909 (RSB Report, Ex. VI).

Subsequent research within the archives of the Russian State Bank identified the remaining instructions. Hottinguer was directed to transfer 4,000,000 francs and Banque de Paris et des Pays-Bas (Paribas) was directed to transfer 1,500,000 francs (RSB Report, Ex. VII).

Together, these four instructions directed the transfer of 15,500,000 francs, on February 22, 1909, to the Russian State Bank—the borrower of the mysterious thirty-day, \$3,000,000 loan reported in New York one month earlier.

The structure of the transfers is significant.

No single syndicate bank possessed sufficient proceeds to satisfy the entire obligation. Each institution held only the proceeds generated through its own underwriting and bond sales. Consequently, the required amount had to be assembled from several syndicate participants.

The repayment, in effect, had to be cobbled together from multiple sources.

The instructions reveal another important detail. The funds were not directed to the Russian Treasury, as was normally the case for ordinary loan proceeds. Instead, all four transfers were directed to the Russian State Bank's *compte de versement*—its payment account maintained at Banque Française pour le Commerce et l'Industrie (BFCI).

That distinction is critical.

The Russian Treasury received government funds. The Russian State Bank conducted Russia's foreign-exchange operations. If a short-term international bridge loan existed, the Russian State Bank—not the Treasury—would be the institution expected to receive and repay it.

The Original Calculation

When these documents were first analyzed, the correspondence between the loan and the disbursement instructions was compelling but not exact.

Using the standard 360-day commercial banking convention:

$$\$3,000,000 \times 1.5\% \times (30 \div 360) = \$3,750$$

Total repayment:

$$\$3,003,750$$

At approximately 5.16 francs per dollar, the repayment obligation equaled (RSB Report, Ex. III):

15,499,350 francs

The documented Ministry of Finance transfers totaled:

15,500,000 francs

The difference was approximately 650 francs.

The figures were extraordinarily close, but not perfect.

For years, that discrepancy remained unexplained.

The Missing Banking Day

The solution lay in the calendar.

The loan was reported as a thirty-day loan. Thirty days from January 22, 1909 fell on Sunday, February 21, 1909.

Under standard banking practice, obligations maturing on a Sunday were settled on the next business day. Payment therefore occurred on Monday, February 22.

That additional day adds precisely one day's interest:

$$\$3,000,000 \times 1.5\% \div 360 = \$125$$

The revised calculation becomes:

$$\text{Interest} = \$3,875$$

Total repayment:

$$\$3,003,875$$

At 5.16 francs per dollar:

$$15,499,995 \text{ francs}$$

The documented transfers totaled:

$$15,500,000 \text{ francs}$$

The difference is five francs.

Five francs in 1909 equaled approximately ninety-seven U.S. cents.

In other words, the discrepancy is less than one dollar on a repayment obligation of \$3,003,875.

The 97-Cent Analysis

The significance of this result cannot be overstated.

The original calculation missed the documented amount by approximately 650 francs.

The additional day of interest contributes \$125. Converted at 5.16 francs per dollar, that additional day accounts for approximately 645 francs—virtually the entire discrepancy.

The revised calculation reproduces the Ministry of Finance transfers to within five francs. Expressed differently:

$$15,500,000 \text{ francs} \div \$3,003,875 = 5.1600017 \text{ francs per dollar.}$$

This differs from 5.16 francs by less than two millionths of a franc per dollar.

Such precision lies comfortably within ordinary banking rounding conventions of the period and is effectively exact.

The discrepancy amounts to less than one U.S. dollar on a transaction exceeding three million dollars.

The correspondence is so precise that coincidence is not a reasonable explanation.

The February 22 disbursement instructions mathematically reconstruct the repayment obligation of the mysterious January loan.

When Did the Money Actually Move?

The January 15 newspaper reports establish that the financing arrangement existed by mid-January. They do not necessarily establish when the funds were actually advanced.

That distinction matters.

Commercial bridge financing is ordinarily borrowed only when needed. A borrower has little incentive to incur interest expense before the underlying transaction requires the funds. At the reported rate of 1½ percent, the carrying cost of the loan was approximately \$125 per day—a substantial amount in 1909 and potentially enough to consume a meaningful portion of the profit in a foreign-exchange transaction. Every unnecessary day reduced the economic benefit of the arrangement.

The more logical interpretation is that the financing arrangement was negotiated and reported during the January 14–15 period but was drawn only when the funds were actually required.

The chronology points directly to January 22.

That was the closing date of the Russian Conversion Loan. It was the final day of the redemption period. It was the point at which the \$3,000,000 balancing payment became due. It was also the day RMS *Republic* departed New York.

The distinction between arrangement and drawdown resolves the apparent timing issue. The loan was known by January 15, but the money was most likely required—and therefore advanced—on January 22.

If the bridge loan financed the acquisition or movement of gold associated with the conversion transaction, January 22 becomes more than a closing date. It becomes the date on which the underlying transfer was executed.

The Curious Coincidence of the Amount

One final observation deserves mention.

The amount of the bridge loan was \$3,000,000.

The cash balancing payment generated by the Russian conversion transaction was \$3,000,000.

The amount required by the Russian State Bank during the thirty-day funding gap was \$3,000,000.

And for more than a century, the amount most frequently reported in newspaper accounts and maritime lore as the value of the gold shipment lost aboard RMS *Republic* was also \$3,000,000 in American Gold Eagle coins.

For decades, researchers treated the reported \$3,000,000 gold shipment as little more than a persistent maritime legend. Yet the financial records examined here reveal a contemporaneous Russian transaction requiring precisely that amount.

Standing alone, the coincidence might be dismissed. Combined with the bridge-loan evidence, the February 22 repayment reconstruction, Gregory Wilenkin's arrival in New York, the timing of the conversion closing, and the January 22 sailing of RMS *Republic*, the repeated appearance of the same figure becomes difficult to ignore.

The number that has echoed through the Republic story for more than a century was not merely the amount reportedly lost.

It was also the exact amount the Russian State Bank needed.

Significance

The reconstruction presented here does not rely upon a single document or a single calculation. Rather, it demonstrates the convergence of multiple, independently discovered sources developed over more than a decade of archival research.

The January 1909 newspaper reports establish the existence of an unusual \$3,000,000 thirty-day bridge loan (RSB Report, Ex. II). The Russian 4½% Conversion Loan explains why precisely \$3,000,000 was required (RSB Report, Ex. I). The Imperial Russian Ministry of Finance instructions document the repayment of that obligation through four French syndicate banks on February 22, 1909 (RSB Report, Exs. VI–VII). The contractual interest provisions, including the additional banking day created by the Sunday maturity, reconcile the repayment amount to within five francs (approximately US\$0.97).

Taken individually, each document contributes only part of the story. Considered together, they form a coherent financial reconstruction identifying both the purpose and repayment of what had long remained an unexplained transaction in the New York money market.

What the Evidence Establishes

The evidence establishes the existence of a short-term bridge-financing transaction linking the January conversion period to the first release of syndicate funds on February 22, 1909.

The chronology is straightforward:

January 14 — Gregory Wilenkin, financial agent of Tsar Nicholas II, arrives in New York.

January 15 — New York newspapers report a mysterious \$3,000,000 thirty-day loan at the unprecedented rate of 1½ percent.

January 22 — The Russian Conversion Loan closes. The redemption period ends. The \$3,000,000 balancing payment becomes due. The bridge financing is most likely drawn. RMS *Republic* departs New York.

February 22 — The Russian Ministry of Finance directs four syndicate banks to transfer a cumulative 15,500,000 francs to the Russian State Bank's payment account.

The amount matches the repayment obligation of the January loan to within approximately ninety-seven cents.

The mysterious thirty-day loan is mysterious no longer.

The February 22 transfers provide its mathematical fingerprint.

What once appeared to be an isolated and inexplicable money-market transaction can now be understood as a bridge-financing mechanism repaid from the first installment of proceeds released under the Russian 1909 Conversion Loan. The financing was arranged by January 15, drawn when needed on January 22, and repaid from French syndicate proceeds on February 22, 1909.

For the first time, the beginning and ending points of the transaction are visible.

Concluding Remarks

The reconstruction of the January 1909 bridge loan illustrates how a single, apparently inexplicable entry in the financial press can be resolved through the patient accumulation of independent documentary evidence. No one of the sources assembled here would be sufficient on its own. A newspaper notice of an anonymous loan proves little; a schedule of interest is only arithmetic; a set of disbursement instructions, absent context, records nothing more than four routine transfers among French banks. It is their convergence that carries the argument.

Considered together, the newspaper accounts, the terms of the Russian 4½% Conversion Loan, the four Ministry of Finance instructions, and the contractual interest provisions describe one

transaction from both ends. They identify the borrower, explain the precise amount, fix the date of drawdown, and reconcile the repayment to within approximately ninety-seven cents. That the reconstruction survives to such a tolerance—less than one dollar on an obligation exceeding three million—places the conclusion beyond reasonable coincidence.

The transaction that puzzled the New York money market in January 1909, and that remained unexplained for more than a century, can now be documented from arrangement to repayment. What began as an anomaly in the financial pages has become a fully reconstructed instance of international bridge financing—one whose closing date coincided with the departure of RMS *Republic* from New York on January 22, 1909.

References

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