

The War in Russia and Siberia

Ludovic H. Grondijs

CHAPTER II

VICTORIES OF THE SIBERIAN ARMY

After short stays in Chita, Irkutsk and Omsk, I went to the front. It was mainly by arms that the fate of the new government would be decided. I did not linger in the headquarters, which were often ill-informed and for whom the fighting strength of units remained a mysterious factor. I could only see things clearly while among the troops.

I arrived in Chelyabinsk, headquarters of the Army of the West,¹ a few days after the capture of Ufa (13 March). General Khangin, a skilled artilleryman, and his staff were full of hope. The arrival of the Allied missions, the distribution of numerous machine guns (400 in the Khangin army alone) and cannons by the French mission, the erroneous announcement of a military intervention by the Allies, the certainty that the whole world was following the course of events in Siberia, whipped up energy. And neither Kolchak nor his generals were yet intoxicated by success. In this land, where optimism is always a danger, uncertainty about the enemy forces and the anxiety about the battle that had just been risked kept people at work.

In short, the centre of gravity of this whole civil war was not in the rear, in the headquarters which exaggerated its importance. It was located within certain shock units which would always easily decide the outcome of the fighting, if they were willing to fight.

To understand the situation at the front at that time of year, you have to imagine the whole region covered by the hostilities being covered with three feet of snow (up to ten feet on some slopes) apart from the roads. There were very few skiers, so all movement is by roads and trails. No retreat is possible if the enemy has managed to slip between an advanced detachment and its base. All the calculations of these icy troops are therefore governed by the fear of encirclement.² One feels that each army is almost always ready to give way, and the smallest mass of manoeuvre, if well led, can bring victory.

The Khangin army has two remarkable "shock" units; the "Ufa Rifle Division" under Colonel Kosmin, and the "Izhevsk Brigade"³ under Colonel Moltchanov. Before setting off, Khangin's general staff divulged the secret, as it were, by having his spies in Ufa spread the news that the "White" army was going to turn Ufa trapping the entire army of occupation. The Red Commissars were thus obliged to reassure their troops in an Ufa newspaper of 20 February, but the blow was struck.

When the "Kosmin Division" broke through the enemy front in the region of Birsk, two enemy battalions joined it and subsequently fought against their former comrades. Five Red detachments, sent to halt its advance on Ufa, were easily defeated: all that was required was to attack with force and decision. Losses were few. Ufa was evacuated in such disorder that the garrison of Sterlitamak was not even informed. An Israelite commissar, sent to Ufa headquarters, thinking he was travelling in safety on the road, was taken by Cossacks who tore him to pieces. The decisive advance of the Kosmin division had been witnessed by Captain François of the French mission. I had known him in Rostov.

¹ There are three armies: the Army of Siberia, under General Gaida in Ekaterinburg; the Army of the West, General Khangin, in Chelyabinsk; and the Dutov Army.

² The war changed its character when the snow melted, making the frontline longer.

³ This excellent unit was composed of workers from the Izhevsk factory, and were particularly fierce against the Soviets. The women accompanied their husbands into battle, carried ammunition and cared for the wounded. They were always used in places needing maximum resistance (against Magyars, Chinese, Communist detachments).



Note on the Siberian Soviet Army

I

Each "division" has 3 brigades, of 3 regiments, of 3 battalions, of 3 companies, of 3 platoons (*vzvods*), of 3 sections (*otdelenies*).

Each regimental commander has a machine-gun company (8 guns), each battalion commander has a machine-gun "*komando*" (6 guns), each company commander has a machine-gun section (2 guns). Each regiment thus had nominally 44 machine guns.

A company normally has 150 men, a regiment between 1,200 and 1,300. A division has 10,500 bayonets.

In the division, an artillery brigade has 3 artillery *divisions*, each 3 batteries of 4 guns. Each regimental commander has a battery at his disposal. The chief of each artillery brigade only gives technical orders to his batteries.

Each division has a *division* of heavy pieces, of 3 batteries with 4 pieces. Nominally, each division has 2 batteries of anti-aircraft guns and 2 detachments of airmen.

II

The war is directed by the Revolutionary Military Soviet of the Republic⁴ on three fronts:

Western front: against Poles and Latvians;⁵

Eastern front: against the Siberian army;

Southern Front: against the Ukraine, the Don, and Denikin.

The Chief of Staff at the G.H.Q. is Colonel Kostyaev.

III

The Siberian front is held by five armies. Each military commander works with members of a Revolutionary Military Soviet, who have the right of veto, I have added to some names of former Tsarist officers a notation of "forced" (to collaborate with the Bolsheviks), without being able to guarantee their accuracy.⁶

The army group in Siberia is commanded by Colonel Kamenev (forced); chief of staff, Captain Koliankovski (forced); members of the RMS, Smilga and Mikhanochin.

3rd Army, facing Perm (29th, 30th, and half of the 7th division); Commander Lashevich; Chief of Staff, Captain Alafusov (forced); member of the RMS, Cossack Trifonov.

2nd Army facing Krasno-Ufimsk (28th, 5th Urals Division and half of the 7th): Commander General Khorin (forced); Chief of Staff, Colonel Afanasich (forced); Chief of the Operations Bureau, General Sunblad (forced); RMS members, Steinberg and Soloviev, both Jewish.

5th army facing Ufa (26th and 27th divisions): Major Blumberg, 23 years old, Jewish; chief of staff, Colonel Ermolin (forced); members of the RMS, Mikhailov, Smirnov.

1st Army facing Orenburg (24th and 1st Penza divisions): Commander Gai; member of the RMS, Berzin (former commander of the 3rd Army, but deposed after the defeats of Kushno and Perm).

4th Army facing Uralsk (25th division): Commander Antonov; members of the RMS, Lindov and Mayolov, both killed by the Cossacks during an unsuccessful assault.

The five armies had between them from 120 to 140,000 bayonets, with 200 guns.

⁴ I have translated the terms directly to current English version of the Soviet military terminology to minimise confusion. Grondijs was generally fairly accurate, but translating via multiple languages otherwise leads to oddities.

⁵ Also the Estonians and the NW Army of Iudenich.

⁶ Few, if any, of the men listed as "forced" were actually forced in reality, but Grondijs was not to know that (and unlike many of the time, he did at least realise he might be wrong). I have left the references as they were in the original document. In reality it means the person was a "military specialist" (*voenspets*).



1. – Ufa

Ufa, 28 March 1919

The southern bank of the river Ufa rises here abruptly, forming a hill, with a broad summit and steep slopes, which makes an unexpected break in the monotony of a landscape that continues the endless plains of Russia. Upper Ufa, with its golden towers and green bell towers, its monastery, the bright colours of its roofs, and the river, the source of life for its inhabitants, evokes the moving image of the great Russian cities and above all the vision of the immortal city of the ancient pilgrimages, Kiev, crowned with cypresses, which is reflected in the fast flowing waters of the Dnieper.

But as you climb the stairs and steep roads to the central city, you lose this impression of beauty and bliss. In this once prosperous capital of government, with its pleasant provincial culture, the streets are empty, families are scattered, life has been reduced to barbarism by the most terrible of civil wars. Only peasants and a few workers are to be seen. The others have followed the fleeing Red Army.

The lovely bourgeois houses, made of wood and covered all over with decorations on beams and boards, in the modern Siberian fashion, are now abandoned and in disarray. One would have expected, however, in a war that is so atrocious against the people, more evidence of fire and devastation. But this war differs from others in that it is being fought among a population that is increasingly neutral, and which both sides want to win over to their side. On losing a city, each party expresses the hope of regaining it and returning to live there. As long as they still hope to reoccupy Siberia, which they claim entirely for themselves, the Bolsheviks behave as if they are their own places when they leave.

They have not observed the same care towards the subjects they claim. During the two and a half months that the Bolshevik regime ruled over the unfortunate city, the number of executions reached a figure of between 1,200 and 1,300. It is easy to gather the most complete accounts of the murders of men, women and children.

A lady named Gharovkina expressed, in an intimate circle, her contentment when Kolchak's troops approached. Denounced and accused of "bourgeois sentiments", she was shot at night.

A certain Puntakov, sixteen years old, had picked up printed proclamations which intrepid Cossacks had thrown to the inhabitants in a suburb of the city. Denounced by his friends, to whom he had distributed a few sheets, he was condemned by a revolutionary tribunal. His parents, weeping, described to me his poor corpse, whose head was pierced by multiple bayonet thrusts.

In order to "purify" the suburbs, the Red guards often played the following comedy: they would enter a home without declaring themselves and ask for lodgings, saying: "We are Whites!" If the host replied, "The Lord be praised", he was shot.

These massacres were not the work of the Red Army, which is made up of conscripts, but of special teams of foreigners (Chinese, Latvians, Austro-Germans, etc.) under the orders of commissars full of resentment against the bourgeoisie. In Ufa, it was a Jewish woman, belonging to the entourage of the commander Komrakov, who most distinguished herself by her relentlessness. Every morning she went to the Soviet prison and asked the commissar-jailer:

"Are there geese today?"

If there were geese to kill this woman, still a young university student, would take her place in the firing squad, shouldering her rifle like the others.

It appears from all my information that the Israelite element was strongly represented among the commissars. Here, as elsewhere in Russia, the Israelites protect their religion, even if they publicly display their apostasy. On the other hand, it is considered bad form among the Orthodox to admit to being Orthodox. Expressing the slightest suspicion of a Jewish commissar exposes the critic to being denounced as a "pogromchik" or even



“chernosotniets”.⁷ This offence, invented by Judeo-Bolshevist propaganda from the beginning of the revolution, has always exposed the offender to execution as a suspect of “counter-revolutionary sentiments”. The haughtiness of the Jews, whom the regime protects – as a protest against the old Russian society – and the false shame of the believers whose worship no authority in Russia dares to patronise, overturns the foundations of religious life. The commissars closed their offices in Ufa (and elsewhere) one day a week, and that was Saturday. The signatures of Jewish commissars appear on official pamphlets and articles in Soviet newspapers, where I read the advice to the Red Guards not to tolerate priests wearing the cross of the *“riassa”* (cassock) in public. There was never any propaganda against the synagogues. No synagogue was ever defiled. A *pogromtchik* who dares to commit sacrilege in a synagogue would be punished by death. But I saw in the barracks church the nails which the Red Guards drove into the noses of Christ and the Blessed Virgin, to hang their caps on. In the school chapel of the Leparkhalnaia church, the Red Guards committed bestial orgies. On a church, whose name I do not remember, the cross above the roof was replaced by the five-pointed star.

I found some senior officers – among them the general commanding the garrison – lodged with Jewish shopkeepers, and living on good terms with them. After the latter have done good business with their Red comrades, they then denounce the Bolsheviks and former friends who have strayed into town, which they do with commendable eagerness. Perhaps they also profit from their mercantile experience. In this way, they make people forget their former complicities and survive – still getting fat – the consecutive regimes.

2. – A New Army Accessory: the *Podvodchik* – Russian Praporshchiks⁸

Kamychli, 1 April 1919

At 10 o’clock in the morning I set out from Ufa, by myself, in a sled, The main route to Sterlitamak descends rapidly from the upper town to the plain, at the time covered with two or three feet of snow. I soon found myself in a huge snowy desert, poorly protected by the few plane trees that lined the road against the violent 10 degree wind. The solitude was only occasionally interrupted by a few caravans: of hay and flour. But on this deserted road I felt safe, in the middle of a civil war: the population took no part in the hostilities. There were two armies fighting, that’s all.

The wind increased in violence in the immense steppe of Ufa and Orenburg, which is famous for its terrible winters. In their farmers’ sleds, the soldiers laid down, their heads completely buried in the hay. Peasants passed quickly by, on horses without saddles. I questioned them. They had been mobilised by the Reds, both horses and sleds. They had taken advantage of the disorder of the retreat to get out, leaving their sleds behind.

Next to the road there were a few corpses that nobody thought of burying. A group of our soldiers looked at them with curiosity: perhaps they were former comrades-in-arms who had left the war against the foreigner and who then found themselves here in a war between brothers. The crows have enlarged the bayonet wounds; the head of one of them was almost gone.

In Kamychli, I stopped at a stage post. Three second lieutenants were busy ensuring the departure of provisions for the front. At any time they might send a soldier to call the *“starost”*, the mayor.

“Starost, at once ten sledges for a cartridge transport to Tolbasy!”

The old man replies, “I obey,” and immediately runs to fetch them. As the transports arrive from the rear – but they rarely arrive – the village delivers sleds with horses and drivers to the regiments, without anyone putting obstacles in the way.

The constraint that the old regime imposed on the villages, which were always obliged to provide free services, is surpassed a thousand times by the tyranny of the Reds, who add to the military harshness with the boorishness of disbanded soldiers. One of the benefits of the revolution most appreciated by the rural class

⁷ A Black Hundred man. The Black Hundreds were far right-wing, nationalists of pre-WWI Russia. They were strongly associated with anti-Semitism, sometimes violently. While often bandied about quite loosely as a term of abuse by the Left, it most certainly was not “invented by Judeo-Bolshevist propaganda”. The Black Hundreds were real, and often quite nasty.

⁸ A rank in the Tsarist army, retained by the Whites, but not seen in most other armies. Sort of half-way between senior NCO and officer.



was its liberation from military burdens. But after returning the young age classes to agricultural work, the Bolsheviks not only took them back again, but they also mobilised the fathers of families, among them old men, for transport purposes. They took them away from their homes, often to other districts, and frequently exposed them to enemy fire.

The Siberian Army brings more wisdom to its requisitions and is followed by a train perhaps unique in military annals. The *podvodchiki* (from *podvoda*, cart) provide the necessary transport to the next village – usually a distance of 20 to 25 kilometres – where they return after handing over the military effects to other peasants. So there is always a back-and-forth on the roads with loaded sleds going to the front and empty sleds going home.

After a year of absolute freedom and another year of intolerable tyranny, complicated by theft and harassment, the peasant is happy with an arrangement which only takes him away from his farm for one or two days, which does not separate him from his horse, and which ensures him (for a meagre payment – 5 roubles a day) the full disposal of his horse as soon as the Siberian armies advance.

The soldiers are also happy: there are always teams for the stage services, and in the event of a retreat – using the same system – fresh horses are available.

Towards evening, the wind was full of snow. Large flakes blinded people and horses in the whirlwinds. I preferred to spend the night with the three *praporshchiks*, very young students, mobilised by the Omsk government who had already fought on the previous front against the national enemy.

Like most of their comrades, they belonged to the middle and lower middle classes, were mobilised and went to war, not without regret. Not very enthusiastic and not looking for brilliant sacrifices, they did not – like many volunteers – set conditions for their participation. These are the officers that the new Russia needs. The “*intelligentsia*” contributed too little to the volunteer detachments. But, forced to fight, these young bourgeois quickly resign themselves to the task imposed on them. They went to war, like the good pawns they were, carrying out with zeal, although without much experience, the work imposed on them by impatient and mocking leaders.

The old regime officers sometimes exasperate with their stiffness, arrogance or over-bearing attitude of soldiers who have returned to military duties, but who ask only small concessions to their temporary dignity. These *praporshchiks* have towards the young and willing soldier, just like themselves, a tone without harshness which does not exclude prestige.

These young officers were poorly clothed, almost in rags, and lacked all the comforts of the rear. Beautiful uniforms, coats, dolmans, brightly coloured caps, and richly decorated sabres are only to be seen in Omsk, Irkutsk, Chita, Kharbin, and Vladivostok, where the old regime officers, who claim to have been ruined by the revolution, astonish and amaze the public with their largesse. Here in the fighting army one finds no tobacco, no sugar, no coffee, not even flour, although the commissariats of the Corps and the Army have them. Provisions were only available in the rear, away from the sounds of the cannon.

My young friends – the eldest was twenty years old – brought the habits of their families into their new life. One of them played the cello admirably; I found an old violin in a local house, and in the evening we organised a small concert. Outside, a raging hurricane screamed. Through all the openings of the doors and windows, at the corners of the stove and of a monumental cupboard, appeared the heads of soldiers and peasants, and the smiling figures of Tatar women, astonished to find themselves in the presence of Bach and Corelli. While I played, a little calf sniffed at my boots with gentle insistence, and a goose tried to tear off my insignia. And in this classical, blissful Christmas atmosphere, the instruments sang Italian adagios and shuffling Slavic melodies.

3. – War of Surprises

Beketova, 2 April 1919

The next day the storm continued with vigour, chasing great clouds of snow and hail across the white immensity. I was provided with horses and, followed by my orderly and a sled with my luggage, I threw myself



into the storm. On the whole of this wide road from Ufa to Sterlitamak, lined with age-old birch trees, there is a single rut which, for many months, Reds and Whites have been using in turn. As soon as I left it to pass the slow procession of *podvodchiki*, my horse sank into two or three feet of snow, soft under a slightly harder surface.

Sixteen kilometres further on, I stopped at Beketova to catch my breath in the priest's house, where, very hospitably, they prepared us samovar and bread. There I met the artilleryman S... who a week ago, at the most critical moment of the advance of the Reds, lost his guns. This is the account he gave me:

"Eager to erase the enormous impression which the recapture of Ufa by the Siberian army had made on the nation, the commander of the 5th Soviet army had piled up large forces in front of the town of Ufa: 8,000 bayonets with 120 machine guns and 21 cannons. The 3rd International Regiment and the 3rd Soviet Regiment were among the shock troops who, in three days, were to drive the Reds back into Ufa."

"On 27 March, Beketova was occupied by two battalions of the 45th Siberian Regiment. Since the enemy could come from any direction in this frontless war, the small garrison moved its two guns to beside of the machine guns on the top of the hill it occupied, dug trenches to the west, south and east, and posted sentries in the surrounding valleys."

"Warned of the approach of the enemy, the garrison kept watch all night, but towards dawn, which came with a heavy fog, all the men fell asleep with incredible carelessness. At 6 a.m. the Reds were in the middle of the village without firing a shot. One battalion commander was killed in his bed, the other seriously wounded. The artillerymen instinctively fired three shots. Lieutenant S... tried to remove the breaches from his guns, but the Reds attacked with bayonets. The same fog which had favoured the surprise allowed a small number of officers and soldiers to escape."

A peasant who was brought to me confirmed that a Lieutenant Lochkin, seriously wounded in the chest, was carried to his house, where the Reds held him down, insulting him. When he asked for a drink, a soldier poured boiling water into his mouth. The officer gave a terrible scream. No one can tell me what happened to him afterwards.

4. – A Latvian General – The Latvians During the Revolution – War of Battalions

Buzoviazhi, 2 April 1919

Towards the afternoon, after a few brief glimmers of light, the horizon disappeared. The storm increased in violence. Cossacks passed me, standing in their stirrups, bent over the necks of their mounts, in a hurry to find the hoped-for shelter. In the sleds I passed, peasants and soldiers astonished me with their motionless and phlegmatic faces.

At nightfall, I arrived at Buzoviazhi, a Tatar village. Nothing but squalid little huts, arranged without order around the *medzjid*⁹ and the Muslim school. General Bangerskiy,¹⁰ commander of the 12th Division, received me in a small room in the school.

He was Latvian, of high status among his people. He had three brothers, soldiers in the Russian army, of which two were killed in action. After receiving his elementary education in a village on the Baltic coast, he gained admittance to the Higher Military Academy in Petrograd, from which he graduated with a fine record. Not belonging to a privileged clan, he remained deeply attached to the fighting army, in which he was anchored by his acknowledged bravery, by his way with new soldiers, and how he accepted the privations and dangers of life at the front.

His double popularity had in a way designated him as the spokesman of the whole front when he asked, during a large banquet in Perm in November 1918, that the Minister of War Kolchak put an end to the political anarchy which was raging in Siberia, and to pronounce his dictatorship. It was not the monarchist party that demanded the rule of the sword. All the officers demanded it, in the name of order. Kolchak did not know how

⁹ mosque?

¹⁰ Bangerskis in the Latvian.



to respond at the time to the toast which the republican Bangerskiy gave him, but the army had pronounced itself against Socialist-Revolutionary doctrines, as any healthy army would have done. The *coup d'état* came from below.¹¹

The Siberian war is being fought by small forces – 140 to 150,000 in the case of the Reds – on a front of about 900 kilometres. There can be no question of maintaining a continuous front. In these provinces, where during the terrible six-month winters the snow accumulates over wide areas, the war is limited to the roads, outside of which the snow reaches a height of two to three feet in the fields and up to twelve feet in some valleys. The forests are inaccessible to both parties. Advances and retreats are therefore – if we exclude a few small detachments of skiers – almost exclusively by roads and paths, which the cavalry cannot leave under any circumstances.

The war takes, as a result of this simplification of movement, an extremely curious character. The forces always collide on the roads, which are relatively easy to defend. The whole war is therefore summed up in efforts to isolate and surround enemy detachments. The cases are rare where a unit surrounded in this way succeeds in forcing their way out of an enemy cordon with the bayonet.

¹¹ The conduct of the Latvian regiments during the second revolution astonished Russians and foreigners alike. Here is the explanation: the old regime had never dared to mobilise the Latvian populace, whose anti-Russian sentiments were notorious. In 1915 Captain Bangerskiy proposed to use the Latvians' hatred of the Germans. Indeed, the former had, in the past, borne the feudal yoke of the Baltic barons with great difficulty. Facts like the following live on in the imagination of these fierce and intelligent peasants: during the 1905 revolution, one Baltic landlord killed 45 Latvian peasants who tried to enter his house, and was then protected from the revenge of the mob by the Russian police.

Captain Bangerskiy proposed to round up Latvians assigned to the ambulance service, telegraph, staff offices, etc., from all over the country. The G.H.Q. accepted his plan. In July 1916, eight battalions were organised, the first commanded by Bangerskiy and the second by Captain Vacietis, a staff officer like himself, but his opponent. Vacietis planned to organise the Latvians into regular regiments, divisions etc. Bangerskiy was of the opinion that they should be limited solely to small shock units, and to use the eminent warlike qualities of this race, whose national sympathies were so insecure, only for small and very daring moves. These Latvian battalions were particularly hated by the Germans, and neither side gave any quarter.

When the peace of Brest-Litovsk came into effect, the Latvians had the choice of surrendering to the German army or withdrawing to Russia with the disbanded army. The German army having begun to serve the policy of the Baltic barons by bloody reprisals among the Latvian peasants, the battalions which Bangerskiy had formed followed the Reds and slowly fell under the influence of the Bolshevik leaders, who promised them a return to their country, and showered them with money and privileges.

Vacietis showed great flexibility during the revolution. Having made offers to Kerenski, when the latter came to power, he offered his collaboration to Trotski from October 1917, and became his right hand. The recent organisation of the Soviet armies is entirely his work. It is fair to add that most Latvian officers refused to follow his example. The counter-revolutionary movement in Moscow in June 1918 included 1,825 Russian and 400 Latvian officers who had disassociated themselves from their soldiers. An indiscretion delivered the secret to the famous giant Muralov, who managed to arrest and shoot 125 of them.

For a long time the Latvian troops were the sole support of the Moscow commissars, and it is a curious fact that, while enemies of the Germans in Riga the Latvians were effectively their allies in Moscow – without gaining the slightest right to leniency if they returned to their homes.

I saw them twice. First at Tikhorit'skaya in the Caucasus, in April 1918, where they had been sent under Vacietis to finish off the *Kornilovtsi*. They made a good impression among the unspeakable Bolshevik troops. The second time, they arrested me in the Kremlin in May of the same year. These handsome fellows had settled in as masters of the place doing exactly what they wanted, under the benevolent gaze of the commissars, and protecting Trotski's tranquillity by the mere threat of their presence.

[The origin of the Latvian Riflemen is usually attributed to Goldmanis and other *duma* deputies. I presume Bangerskiy's role has been enlarged by Grondijs because Bangerskiy was very senior in the Siberian White Army and was the source of this information. Vacietis commanded the 5th Latvian battalion, not the second.

Grondijs's explanation of why the Latvian Riflemen supported the Bolsheviks is equally wrong.]



Only the villages are occupied. A manoeuvre column therefore sets off, following the paths, to cut off an enemy garrison from the rear. As soon as the enemy senses the danger, it in turn sends a column along a perpendicular path to cut off the retreat of the first one, which is often forced to turn back.

Sometimes strong enemy columns set out simultaneously from both sides, seize an enemy base, then returning home after a hard-fought success are received there with machine-gun salvos. Thus the 46th Siberian Regiment, occupied Terugulova, and the 231st Soviet Regiment, at the village time the village of Adzitarova.

These attacks can only succeed if they are carried out with speed and enthusiasm. It is easy to imagine the irresistibly comic and horrifyingly deadly character of this kind of manoeuvre in a country where all actions are slowed down by apathy and obstinacy.

5. – Neutral Bashkirs – A Proletarian Army in Carts – We Will Only be Supplied by the Enemy.

Tolbasy, 3 April.

After spending the night with the Tatar schoolmaster in the village of Buzoviazhi, I had a long talk with him while I shaved without a mirror, multiplying the movements of my razor, which the women and children, crowded in front of the doorway, followed with “ahs” and “ohs” of sincere and amusing fright.

The head of the family assured me that the Muslim population was happy with the departure of the Reds and our arrival, without however wanting to take an active part in the civil war. They are a separate race, an outpost of Mongolia and the Caucasus, not interested in the conflicts between Russians. They are peasants, bearing little resemblance to their brother Caucasian mountain people, but having retained the appetites of the old warlike invasions.

They are alert, but not very robust, with a swarthy complexion and lively eyes, and are seriously attached to their religion and ancient customs. They only wish to live modestly in the narrow circle of communal life. The women, not very pretty, walk with their faces uncovered, but have an attitude full of reserve and dignity. The huts were, with the exception of those of the priest and the schoolmaster, poor and badly maintained. We found ourselves among a defeated race pushed to the very edge of Christian civilisation.

They claimed to have submitted to the demands of the Reds, because they were pushed around by them. But if we spoke to them in a soft voice, they tried to hide their little provisions from us, and we would get nothing. So we had to raise our voice, push them around, since they only obey force, and since the rear doesn't send us anything.

We set off early in the morning, General Bangerskiy, his *aide-de-camp* and I, lying down in wicker baskets, placed on runners, which are the customary vehicle here during the winter. An escort of Cossacks protected us against possible attack by enemy cavalry.

The great old road from Ufa to Sterlitamak, which we were using, showed only one rut in the middle, through which the sleds and all the friendly and enemy artillery had passed. The road had the appearance of a sea whipped up by a storm, the waves of which had been coagulated by a terrible and sudden cold. The horses pulled our sleds with difficulty through enormous troughs, perpendicular to the road, sometimes more than a metre deep, which follow one another for dozens of kilometres, without interruption.

The wind had stopped. Through a dissipating fog, a weak sun cast red glints on the quadruple rows of old birch trees that lined the road. Huge flocks of crows rose as we approached from the fields, where the bloody flesh of men and horses lay. Only the few corpses close to our rut, livid and hard as stone, had escaped their beaks due to the continual noise of the transports. Nobody buried them, but each time I saw groups of soldiers who had stopped their sleds to observe them, coldly and silently. They are only enemy corpses.

We stopped in Tolbasy for the night. Things were good, but our situation was not without danger.



The enemy was fleeing along the route, over which all the neighbouring villages had directed their garrisons. An unbroken line of sleds, several dozen kilometres long, was moving towards the south in panic.¹² Our division, the 12th, pursued them. The 45th regiment was on the main road; the others were to our right and left, threatened to encircle them. The 41st and 46th regiments, ahead of the 45th by about ten kilometres, had taken the villages that had been designated for them at the bayonet. But our rapid advance caused us to lose contact with our neighbours on the left. The Reds, who were retreating in front of the latter, could have obviously played a bad trick on us by using the cross paths to get into our rear. Those paths were incompletely guarded by our 47th regiment, which had been reduced to a quarter of its strength by previous fighting.

But we worked on the basis that troops who were being carried in sleds and had so much baggage following them were thinking only of their own safety. The Red division, retreating along the Arkhangel'skoye to the Sterlitamak road, was also threatened by the 3rd Orenburg Cossack Brigade operating to the east. But the Cossacks could not be relied upon until they sensed the enemy's defeat. And the Reds, who had not suffered major losses in their withdrawal, could not be considered defeated.

I spent the night in a Tatar farmhouse, with three artillery officers, who had fought in the Great War. After having all the beds and divans removed, being infested with vermin, we lay down on the straw. In the middle of the night, the telephone rang in our room. Colonel Chlesinski, awakened with a start, listened to the complaints of two heavy batteries and two light batteries (each with 2 pieces) that the better organised enemy was shelling heavily. Having received the order to bombard the enemy positions at dawn, the artillerymen asked for immediate supply of shells. The heavy batteries had 35 and 10 shells, the light batteries 5 and 10 shells respectively. Colonel Chlesinski, furious at his impotence, shouted into the telephone:

"You have to obey the orders that the corps commander has given you. As for me, I cannot send you anything. I order you to observe the strictest economy with your provisions! Tomorrow you will get your supplies from the enemy.

Immediately afterwards, he sent the following telegram to the Corps:

"I suggest you give an order to withdraw all the batteries from the front immediately, where they are in danger. We have not received any shells for several days now."

The fact is that the shells intended for us have been at Chesnakovka for six days, and cannot be transported due to lack of sleds. In Ufa, where the Director of Artillery of the 4th Corps, his aides-de-camp, and all those responsible for supplying the front lived, there was no shortage of sleds. There it was cheerful in the cafés, there were plenty of easy-going women, and one could still lead – God be praised – an existence worthy of a gentleman. Whereas in these pagan villages it was devilishly cold, one was bored and sometimes in danger.

My brave comrades, Colonels Chlesinsky and Bek-Mamedof, complain about the shortage of shells above all, but I had no difficulty in observing that nothing, or almost nothing, arrives from the rear. No flour, nor especially those delicacies which make the hard life at the front bearable: coffee, sugar, tobacco, etc. We are already taking comfort in this:

"If we manage to speed up the enemy's escape, he will be forced to cough up his stuff.

And I began to understand that this army, carried forward by the energy of the leaders and the excellent qualities of the soldier, but almost isolated from the rear, was fighting not only to defeat the enemy, but also to supply itself.

¹² Yes, the Red soldiers, proletarians and communists, spared themselves the fatigue of marching, by letting themselves be transported in sleds by the peasants. Calculated at 4 men per sled, that made 450 sleds for a regiment of 1,400 bayonets and the rest, to which must be added at least 650 sledges for all the provisions, ammunition, etc. Each regiment thus formed an immense procession of 1,100 transports, which occupied the only road it could follow, for a length of 10 kilometres or more. Our soldiers, who went on foot – like our officers – thus have the advantage of speed, being less encumbered.



6. – Siberian soldiers – Entry into Sterlitamak

Sterlitamak, 4 April 1919

The snow continued to fall in heavy flakes in a very feeble daylight. Horsemen, Tatar peasants, Siberian soldiers, and the sleds and cannons, placed on long runners – the whole procession of men and things seemed to move as if under the surface of transparent water, with the light penetrating from all sides at once.

At six kilometres from the town, I joined the regimental commander, who was gesticulating to a group of officers, under one of the birch trees which bordered the route. The 45th was by itself on the road. To the right was the sound of cannon fire: the Reds were resisting on the road to Samara, which we wanted to cut off. On the left, nothing. A reconnaissance to find a link with the 47th, was carried out in a weak manner and had no result. In front of us, on the same road that the enemy could not leave, there were large forces that would have to be pushed back if they did not withdraw, because Sterlitamak was to be occupied overnight.

I looked carefully at the soldiers gathered around us. They were the young classes, kids between 18 and 20 years old, in whom the revolution had not yet killed all obedience. They had been marching hard for four days in deep snow, poorly clothed and fed, being fired at two or three times a day, and having had only three hours sleep each night. I saw among them skinny boys, almost children, their eyes wide with fatigue, all the more pitiful since they did not even have the consolation of having gone as volunteers. But they are of a race accustomed to the hardships of life, to the terrible cold that no other soldier in the world would endure for six months at a time. Still children, in the immense solitudes of Siberia, who in the past would have been expected to engage in battles with wolves and hungry bears, armed only with axes. There was no time – facing a large army which lacked nothing – to train these young soldiers, to harden their bodies against the fatigues of military life. The rear is enriched at their expense, robbing them of blankets and boots, leaving them without medicine, without sufficient weapons, without ammunition, even without the comforts that console the soldiers of other armies.

But they were held together by a discipline which I found excellent, obeying humble young officers whom they understood, from a class that found the Bolshevik regime deeply repugnant, and supported by the villages which receive them as saviours. They were also supported by their victory, with the evidence of disarray among the Reds, and finally by that mixture of comradeship and military pride, which – always – constitutes the soul of a regiment. They were the younger cousins of those Russian soldiers who were sent into the fire in 1914 and 1915 in dense masses to be mowed down by the German machine guns, without rifles or artillery preparation. Those brave men who astonished the foreigners by their gentleness and enthusiasm, those incomparable Russian soldiers – whom history will not see again.

Two battalions of the 45th remained in place; the first, commanded by Captain Sedich – whom I accompanied – advanced. Sedich arranged his 200 men (some companies had only 43 soldiers) in two lines perpendicular to the road. Several soldiers start digging small trenches in the hard snow, from which they had to be driven out, as we were attacking. It is 8 o'clock. A wet snow was blowing in our faces, but the atmosphere was clearing up. Soon we could see the dark profile of the city on the horizon between the light snow and the grey sky. In the distance, furious barking, which, during periods of drowsiness, seems a long, bitter and muffled complaint. Over there, the Red column probably passes.

To the left, towards the horizon, a small red dot widened: a burning house. Against the burning clouds we could make out the elegant profile of a minaret and the cathedral. A few horsemen passed in the distance, clearly visible against the blaze, and come back, then machine guns burst out.

Rifles are fired in front of us. We have to push forward our soldiers from resting once more. A scout comes to warn us that the enemy trench is in front of us, half a kilometre away. Out of nervousness, some soldiers started firing, aimlessly, and we had to get them to be quiet.

We heard very clearly one of the town's belfries striking nine times for the hour. Almost immediately a new fire broke out, very close to the first, and we witnessed brilliant fireworks, double-burst rockets, long parabolas of light, lighting up the sky from one end to the other, and showing against the reddened snow the



silhouettes of our soldiers in a long double line. Soon a continued series of violent explosions reached us. The retreat of the Reds was now an accomplished fact, as they had set fire to their ammunition stores.

There was a lot of shouting from the enemy trenches. First names or words we did not understand, and after a while a loud, clear voice shouted:

“Third Battalion to the road!”

We expected a furious attack from the road by the Magyars and Chinese we knew were in front of us (green troops would have long since opened fire). We put our three machine guns in position on the road, but silence greeted us.

I joined the scouts who, a hundred metres ahead, had set up on both sides of the road. In the distance, vague figures moved in the relative darkness. We had to be sure. I pushed the two *praporshchiks* and their 17 men forward. After three minutes we found the enemy trenches empty. In another ten minutes we reached the first houses; we shouted to the inhabitants, who reported that the Reds had just passed by.

Half a kilometre from the cathedral, there were figures running: a whole stampede of fugitives. Warnings, then rifle shots. We chased the nearest shadows who had disappeared into the courtyard of a house, but as we enter, gun in hand, they jumped over a wall. We had to give up the pursuit.

While our soldiers searched the houses in pairs for hidden Bolsheviks, there was shooting from behind us: the 1st Battalion, which had finally arrived in the town, had taken us for the enemy. We exhaust our military vocabulary: “Idiots, pigs, half-wits, you’re shooting at your own people!”

Ten brass knocks sounded out. At a furious gallop: the Cossacks had come to “pursue” the enemy. The news that we had entered the town reached the rear guard. At the turn of a street, it is a joy to see the dark mass of the old cathedral, with its heavy bell tower, blackened by age, rising from the immense depths of the snow. Sterlitamak was ours!

7. – The inhabitants – A “traitor”

Sterlitamak, 5 April 1919.

When I entered the street in the morning, the whole population was outside. Bourgeois and proletarians, workers and peasants, Russians, Tatars or Bashkirs, Christians or Muslims, men, women and children, full of nervous joy, gathered in groups around our soldiers and Cossacks.

Used to gunfire and incessant troop movements, they had spent the night locked up in their houses, without suspecting that their sleep would be interrupted – already – by the sound of our weapons. When they saw the distinctive rank insignia of our officers, the red shoulder patches of the Cossacks, and the perfect order of our troops entering in a continuous stream, everyone was stunned. There was no outpouring of joy or cheering or singing in the streets, since they were Russians. But the inhabitants seemed to breathe in an easier atmosphere, they ambled aimlessly around – from morning to evening – in compact masses, chatting with our people, following our musicians, entering the churches to pray; only the sick stayed at home.

Realisation of the Bolshevik dream had been entrusted to the comrades all together, and to each one individually. Soldiers took coats they liked from passers-by, communists entered women’s rooms, demanding a place in bed or the bed itself. Houses were entered, day and night, with weapons in hand, to steal. At the slightest resistance, you could be arrested as a counter-revolutionary and, once the misunderstanding was cleared up, you would find your house empty. And let us be clear that these measures were not directed solely against the “bourgeois”. Everyone was attacked and furniture might be taken from the poor, who let it happen out of fear.

In front of the house of the commander of the 45th regiment, a crowd had gathered of poor Tatar and Russian peasants, looking miserable in their torn clothes. Shouting and crying, they complained that the Reds had taken their last horses and cows. These are people cured of Bolshevism for the few days we will be here.

There is no lack of humour. Mrs. N., a good pianist, tells me that the Red Commissars had decided, as soon as they entered Sterlitamak, that the soldiers would enjoy the benefits of culture previously monopolised by the



bourgeoisie. Mrs. N. and a colleague, who had also graduated from the Petrograd Conservatory, were nationalised to give collective piano lessons to the comrades. About forty pianos were assembled in a public hall. The two ladies, seated on a platform in front of two grand pianos, taught their musical secrets to a hundred or so ambitious people crowded around the instruments in the hall. The poor proletarians learned the hard way that the best joys of civilisation will never belong to anyone but the “*kaloï kagathoi*”¹³ and that pure gold will turn, through contact with the crowd, into the vile metal of boredom and suffering. After two sessions, when they found it impossible to play a foxtrot or a two-step (the ideal music of a scoundrel), they left grumbling.

Sterlitamak, 7 April 1919

The day before yesterday, about twenty officers who had served the Reds went to General Bangerskiy’s house to ask for asylum. They belong to three categories:

The first, that of the adventurers, is represented by a Czech, a shady individual who, after having served General Dutov as a spy and having attached himself to a Bolshevik counter-espionage service (he claimed to do so in order to better serve our cause), offered to enlist in our general staff. He begged not to be sent to Omsk, where he would most probably be shot by his compatriots.

Then there are about fifteen officers from Bashkir regiments who, betrayed by their troops and surrounded by the Communists, had been forced to follow their soldiers to the Reds. They were accepted after a short investigation.

The last category divided the opinions of our officers. A lieutenant of the old army, who had just taken over as Chief of Staff of the 20th Penza Division, had fallen into our hands. I met him three times in the offices and corridors of the 12th Division. He talked with us absent-mindedly, accepted the cigarettes I offered him, but already felt separated from us by an abyss. He refused to say what he knew about the Red Army, and exposed himself to malice, even among those who would be inclined to excuse his “treason”. In the violent discussions that took place between us about him, the same facts served as premises for opposing arguments. For some, his refusal to reveal the plans of the Reds proved honourable conceptions of military honour. For others, the lieutenant thus accepted solidarity with an army that treated our officers – and his former comrades – whom it took with the utmost savagery. In general, the volunteer officers who belonged to the Tsarist army ask for his death, except for the old ones, who have learned from life to forgive human weaknesses, and who may have sons in Russia.

The lieutenant was shot last night. He had allowed himself to be forced by a member of the Revolutionary Military Soviet to put his signature under a decree condemning a number of civilians to death. The firing squad was led by a friend of mine, a very brave, sympathetic, quiet young officer who had lost his property in the revolution, whose father had been massacred and whose sisters had been ill-treated by Reds. He had begged General Bangerskiy to grant him the favour of being able to command the firing squad against condemned “traitors”. We were on the best of terms, and I exchanged a warm handshake with him when I met him. He interesting to talk to; but when I asked him about “his” executions, he smiled enigmatically, and refused to answer.

8. – Optimism in Omsk

Sterlitamak, 8 April 1919

General Bangerskiy has just received a copy of the new directives for the army. Omsk, joyous and spreading its gladness through the universe, ordered us to continue the operation, without slackening. We will take Kazan and Samara, and then we will march on Moscow. In the meantime, our soldiers will march 30 km a day against enemy fire. Of course, this warm optimism in the rear, this patriotism of those settled in, will not improve the service of the commissariat. Flour does not arrive, nor ammunition, nor boots, nor blankets, nor guns. The thaw widens the rivers; small rivers have beds one or two km wide. But enthusiasm will support our young soldiers, where machine-gun fire from across huge fields of mud, lack of food and clothing would demoralise

¹³ A classical Greek term for the gentlemanly upper classes.



any other soldier in the world. The companies have an average of forty men of good will, but they were too young and exhausted. The numbers will be topped up during the march. Regimental commanders begged for rest, equipment and time to cement the troops. But in Omsk, civilian and military circles compete in toasts about the marvellous qualities of this poor Russian soldier, who will pull himself out of trouble, supported as he is by the sympathy and gratitude of the rear.

However while the Reds are in retreat they were not beaten, and begin to offer resistance; the Orenburg Cossacks sent in pursuit notice this. Their soldiers lack nothing, as we can see from the provisions they leave us. They have a class which we lack: that of the "communists", who permeate all the services, animated by the same fanaticism. They have discipline, from top to bottom. They have all rediscovered submission, that blessing of the old regime, under men who are evil but who are their masters.

