

The War in Russia and Siberia

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CHAPTER III

A Strategic Retreat

I. The evacuation of Ufa

Turkan (West of Ufa), 29 May 1919

The general retreat of the Army of the West to the line of the Belaya River has been decided. The reasons are multiple: fevered by miraculous successes for two months, Omsk and the army staff had decided to continue the advance, contrary to the opinion of the staffs at the front. The troops were exhausted and had lost up to two thirds of their strength. Several regiments had between 700 and 800 men, some companies between 40 and 50 soldiers. The melting snow had widened the rivers beyond measure, making them extremely easy to defend. The enemy was going to oppose us with shock units, very well organised and led, which would be inflamed by the acrid word of the prophet Trotski. Our soldiers, ill-equipped and ill-fed, would march 30 versts a day, and would – to avoid any delay in the victorious march on Samara – be added to and consolidated *en route*.

To the inevitable halts in the advance was added treachery. To this army of peasants mobilised in the governments of Ufa, Perm and Akmolinsk, and therefore having no reason to surrender to the enemy, Ukrainians were added, superbly equipped in brand new English costumes. Instead of dispersing them among the Siberians, they were organised collectively, probably to make it easier for them to commit treason. By entrusting them with the attacks along the railway line, it was perhaps intended to suggest to them the idea of surrendering *en bloc* and entering their homeland. Bolshevik propaganda was quick to seize on this. Near Buguruslan, a Ukrainian regiment, favoured by the British mission and General Kappel, massacred a large number of officers (two hundred it is reported) and joined as one the attacking Red troops – and thus opened the front.

A long, uninterrupted series of small defeats along the entire front gave no hope of a return of fortune. It was impossible to take a strong position even on the right bank of the Belaya, which would avoid the look of a new failure to the tired and disappointed soldiers.

Thousands of wagons, the artillery of three army corps, important war supplies, pushed forward for the march on Samara, were now piled up behind a weakly defended front. All the repercussions which the retreat of a somewhat demoralised army before a superiorly supplied enemy presents, was concentrated on this stretch of railway which from Chishmy – the point of meeting of the two lines of Simbirsk and Samara – leads, by the great bridge of Dioma¹ to the town of Ufa.

The area between the Belaya and today's front, had already been abandoned. The enemy now began to infiltrate here and there with frequent incursions of the Red cavalry, against the unequal resistance that our unorganised troops were putting up against the enemy's constant pressure.

All along the railway in this zone there were guard troops positioned near the stations and halts, and who, camped in the open air, guarded the accesses to the railway. As soon as the sun set, large campfires were lit in the meadows and forests. During the interminable evenings, the soldiers, lying or sitting around the red flames, found the memory of village life in the dances and the delicious *ritornellos* of the national melodies, often superbly executed by a country artist. The repeated departures of the scouts and sentries for the advanced posts were scarcely noticed in the phlegmatic and carefree gaiety, which was astonishing by its contrast with the incalculable calamity which had struck our armies.

¹ or Dema.



My wagon, travelling against the current of the trains being sent back east, had moved only very slowly for the last twenty-four hours. At Turkan it stopped indefinitely.

During the morning a command pushed all the trains at the halts and stations along the whole length of the track onto side tracks, and an armoured train on its way to the front, carrying platforms loaded with machine guns, passed heavily and threateningly through the bright sunny landscape.

I had been stationary for twelve hours in the small halting place of Turkan, 6 kilometres from Chishmy. Rifle shots were heard in the vicinity. Our outposts were chasing an enemy cavalry reconnaissance. The Reds make some efforts to cut the track between Chishmy and Ufa, where a thousand wagons are piled up. Not wanting to risk losing my wagon, I have it attached to the first train to Ufa.

2. - Optimism during the Retreat

Ufa, 29 May 1919

You could see the artillery withdrawing, with a little too much eagerness on the bad roads. The large convoys, preceded by strong cavalcades, sought new positions in the rear, positions that would soon be abandoned because of a lack of confidence in the infantry.

Some staffs sent their trains to the rear, and retained for their transport only carts and mounts. All these trains, staff wagons, medical wagons, quartermaster's wagons, ammunition wagons, troop transport wagons, military workshops, platforms loaded with pontoons, cannons, carts, sleds, and every conceivable piece of machinery, rolled with amusing slowness towards Ufa, on a route that had been built with no consideration for strategic issues. Pile-ups occurred in front of the big bridge over the Belaya at Dioma, and here in Ufa. But from this apparent disorder there regularly emerged huge trains of 70 to 76 wagons which, delayed at each stop for hours, at their 2 kilometres an hour crawled slowly towards the zone of safety.

During its retreat, our army destroyed the small bridges to delay the enemy armoured trains, and if necessary, would sacrifice the large Dioma bridge. But even after the relentlessness or desperation of eleven months of a war such an act of vandalism, removing one of the main instruments for retaliation, would perhaps mean too complete an admission of irretrievable defeat.

Acha Balachovska, 1 June

After securing my wagon, I returned to the front. But the petty mindset of both civilian and military officials, finds it hard to deal with a simple movement in the opposite direction once the retreat has begun. So I have plenty of time, in the *teplushka*,² where I am seated with a dozen officers and about twenty men, to make my observations.

The hopes of a month ago were held obstinately, and the retreat was so contrary to them that the most extraordinary rumours were being spread, even by the generals. The rumours were difficult to check, since relations between staffs had often not been re-established after being completely lost for some days. It was believed, however, that our retreat was part of a general plan. The Gaida army, which was only 120 kilometres from Kazan, was thought to be ready to storm this last redoubt of Bolshevism on the Volga. The flight of the Reds and a liaison with Denikin's troops were considered to be a matter of only a few days away, and the like. People were revived, courage was rekindled.

Many of the staffs conducted themselves well. General Voytsekhovskiy,³ commander of the 2nd Corps in Ufa, twice ventured into enemy rifle range. Another example is that of General Kappel, who rode on horseback, surrounded by a cavalry guard, so as to be able to control the work of his regiments for longer. The complete absence of news from him for five days gave rise to the optimistic conjectures I mentioned above. It is, however, astonishing that a link by Cossack riders has not been established.

² Railway box-cars, the main way of carrying troops by rail.

³ Sergei Wojciechowski was a Czech of Russian birth.



3. – The misery of refugees

Between Acha-Balachovska and Ufa, 2 June

And still this noisy movement towards the East. 3,500 wagons were carrying the equipment of the army and the Ufa bourgeoisie. Government officials, local authorities, railway personnel, priests, big and small bourgeois. Christians, Jews, or Tatars. All those who were threatened with death or official harassment by the Red Terror, and who through their social position or their friends had been able to secure a passenger wagon, baggage wagon or even cattle wagon. All the doors of the wagons were open, and in these thousands of cars a kaleidoscopic view of human misery unfolded.

All the unfortunates, who had returned to Ufa a little more than two months ago – with furniture and baggage, full of confidence in over-optimistic proclamations and prospects, and who had set about rebuilding their destroyed homes. This time they were only taking with them what they held most dear in their painful flight. One lady, a landlord whom I had met in Sterlitamak, was travelling with two children and five horses, all crammed into the same cattle wagon. In other carriages, two or three families had gathered: people of good standing, well dressed, but who in this squalid environment had difficulty in maintaining cleanliness. Sometimes there were also more cheerful spectacles: I saw around a table laden with an enormous samovar, an astonishing number of young girls, in bright dresses, full of gaiety and verve. But through most of the wide, half-open doors of the cattle cars, one could see in people bent over with worry and dejection.

And yet, among the numerous fleeing population, all those who were able to register on the lists for the wagons, were privileged beings. Alongside the railway, another endless procession accompanied the flight of the bourgeoisie: it was the exodus of the little people. Firstly, there were a few “bourgeois” who had not wanted to believe in such an improbable and sudden defeat, or who had preferred to remain under the Red terror rather than abandon the little they possessed, but who in the last days when the cannon thundered in front of the city were seized with a ferocious fear, threw a few belongings into a cart and fled, as if pursued by demons. And then, in incalculable numbers, workers and peasants, relatives of soldiers serving in the “White” army or simply people who had experienced Bolshevism: they now filled to the horizon the roads leading from Ufa to Zlatoust.

On top of the crowded exodus of the wealthy class and those attached to traditional government, here was another group that gives us much more to think about. A populace, on which the government had been unable to exert any pressure, but which showed its true feelings towards a regime which claims to be based on its aspirations with their frantic and spontaneous flight. Peasants, workers and petty bourgeois fled from the high cost of food, the insecurity of life, famine, an intolerable tyranny of a thousand officials, which did not spare any ways of life, traditions or the intimacy of the family. They did not show any exaggerated affection for the Admiral’s government, but they appreciate a purely national regime, in the very vague and all the better understood sense of the word. And they compared the reign of the Russian aristocratic classes with this Red regime with its incredible rudeness, which is simply a grotesque exaggeration of the bad manners naturally inherent in all democracies.

Nearby, a Tatar peasant passed by, with his wife and a little boy, barefoot, loaded with bags, dark and tired. Everywhere – in the meadows, the fields and on the edge of the forests, I saw refugee camps, preparing their simple meals over the dry branches that the children had found under the trees. Horses unharnessed, cattle being rescued, grazed around the groups made up of all classes, mingled in the brotherhood of misfortune. And finally, on all the roads, as far as the eye could see, the procession of refugees, in small packs. What I saw was like a silent and eloquent plebiscite of an entire people on the revolution: acclaimed as a transition to a higher social state, but which is thought to have definitely failed.

4. – Soldiers in English Equipment – Requisitions

Tavtmanova, 3 June

The Khangin army is composed of units of very unequal worth. A whole army corps, as well prepared as it could be by General Kappel, a thousand miles from this war of surprises, had recently made its entry into the front. Its soldiers were outfitted in complete English equipment. It was hoped that this would give them added



dignity, which would pass on to the other military virtues, but in no way were they superior to their brothers-in-arms, the *sans-culottes* who had been fighting for eleven months. On the contrary, one regiment admired by everyone in the interior of Siberia as living proof of the Allies' help, had surrendered to the Bolsheviks – as I said above – and those men of false courage were waiting, as the price of their treachery, to be sent back to the Ukraine.

I saw, in the ambulance cars and *teplushkas* that pass by, many wounded, dressed in English clothing. A rough calculation gives the following result: 80% injured on the index finger of the left hand, 15% on the same finger of the right hand (presumably left-handed), and only 5% more seriously injured. This is hardly reassuring. I doubt whether such palpable cases of cowardice are committed with the same impunity among the Bolsheviks, whose severe and bloody discipline is to be admired.

Iglino, 3 June

Two wagons of ammunition, urgently requested for the front, and to which I had our *teplushka* attached, had already been sitting in Tavtimanova for two days. Since there was a general order to retreat, the officials, unless they were given a sufficient shake – there is no equivalent of a Red Commissar or the Cossacks to put a revolver to their heads – did not send anything further forward.

So I left the cartridges and shells to rust 50 kilometres from the front. I requisitioned a two-horse peasant's cart, driven by a Bashkir, and left with my orderly for Iglino.

In the village of Bashkirskaia – which was *mirabile dictu*, a Russian village – where I stopped to take a samovar, some simple peasants I spoke to pointed out a small white house: "Don't come to us. Go over there, he's a bourgeois!"

What a deadly accusation at a time when everyone believed the arrival of the Reds was imminent! In the white house, poor but neat, and where engravings and graceful bunches of flowers showed a certain taste, I found the wife and mother of the schoolmaster, who himself had fled in the company of the priest and a number of peasants.

In Iglino, I spent the night with the peasants. Like almost everywhere, the village is in a struggle with the transport commander, to whom the military turn at every moment for cars and horses. The "White" army had introduced, after the arbitrary and vexatious methods of the Bolsheviks, a more humane system of requisitioning. The populace had begun by joyfully welcoming – sometimes in religious processions⁴ – the "liberators", but inevitably ended up rebelling against the loss of the sacred right of property, which every army ranks equally as the inviolable duty of a citizen. For the holy war against the Bolsheviks, the peasants gave their sons without resistance; but as soon as it was a question of bringing food and cartridges to the front, they hid their carriages and chased the horses into the distant forests. They hoped that, as soon as peace was declared, their sons would return to them, and that they would find the yard and the stables filled.

But there was no time to waste, and it was impossible to put the recalcitrant intentions of the inhabitants on trial. The Omsk government's wise and prudent policy for the provinces, which for so long had spared the ticklish susceptibility of the small landowners on whom the regime wanted to rely, was no longer possible. It is therefore necessary to quickly arrest and punish the people who were suspected of wanting to evade the requisition orders.

⁴ Everywhere these same peasants later came out to meet the Soviet troops, priest in the lead, carrying icons and banners waving in the wind, offering bread and salt to the victors. Was it a protest against the atrocities of the admiral's government? Or the pure joy of the proletariat to be able to cheer their liberators? Not at all. A Russian (or any other) government would be most wrong to attribute excessive value to demonstrations of the "will of the people". The Omsk government did not have the elite to lead the nation. It had been too hard in the cities and too soft in the provinces. The peasants feared the commissars and scoffed at the humanity of Kolchak's officers and officials. As they carried to the victor each time not only the bread, but the host, they seemed to say: "Whoever you are, be strong, and we will obey and love you!"



Torbasli (on the Belaya), 4 June

I left Iglino in the morning and arrived at noon at Shaksha, a small station on the banks of the Ufa River, and the HQ of General Voytsekhovskiy, commander of the 2nd Army. He was a young officer full of energy and intelligence, whose beginnings in Siberia – like those of General Grivin – were supported by the Czechs. With him I find Captain Lacau, a French officer of proven bravery and high culture.

The two armies looked at each other all along the banks of the Belaya. The Reds had the initiative, since our role was limited to waiting. We feared them crossing at a particularly dangerous point, where the river forms a loop near Krasnyi Yar, which prevented a full defence of our side.

I then went to see General Kosmin, commander of the 4th division, to whom the sector north of Ufa was entrusted. General Kosmin had earned a reputation due to his deep raid with 4,000 men into the Red lines in March, which led to the capture of Ufa. He was an educated and energetic officer, and had given proof of a fearlessness which is not lacking among division leaders in this Siberian guerrilla war. He was aware of what was happening in Omsk and in the quartermasters' offices, and he told me that he would soon be arriving in Omsk – if circumstances at the front permitted – to sweep away the entire band of parasites with his four regiments, who he assured me he had completely in hand.

In the evening I arrived at the home of Colonel Slotov, commander of the 14th regiment. He was a Cossack from Orenburg, stocky, breathing energy, loving war for war's sake, sharing the hatreds of his troops and firing them up at the right moment. He belonged, like Generals Bangerskiy, Kosmin, Grivin, Colonels Molchanov, Larionov, and a few others, to a category of patriotic senior officers – not very numerous in Siberia. They were intrepid, of simple habits, loving and seeking contact with their men, open to their complaints and sufferings. In short, the kind of officers for those soldiers forced into war, and who would have been able to do more if they were better supported by the rear, which was letting them down. There was a gulf between the regiments which fought, isolated, in deep misery, and the distant headquarters which directed the war from fifteen hundred km away. And one met two opposing opinions on the recruitment, training and arming of the fighting units.

Because of the small number of troops in relation to the front, and because of the undecided convictions of the opponents, the Siberian war was prone to surprise and chance. It required bold leaders with initiative and timing, whose long experience in guerrilla warfare had created a personal reputation for bravery and a habit of success that could influence men.

A year ago, the officers I have mentioned clustered under the umbrella of the Czechs – foreigners are to be found in every beginning in Siberia – being the first volunteers around the Russian flag. Those officers, promoted to more important posts, were more or less the only people able to influence in any way the general conduct of the war.

New units were organized behind the front, under officers whose military experience had been interrupted by a stay in China or in the Siberian capitals, and to which arms, equipment and the comforts of life were distributed in abundance. These other regiments, which had been in the field for a year, were left to fend for themselves as best they could for food, clothing and weapons – and were cynically advised, when they complained, to go and buy supplies from the Reds. They had done so since the advance. During the retreat, the Red supply system, abundant and controlled strictly, was not available!

6. - Muslim *Sans-culottes*

Novo-Torbasli, 5 June.

Colonel Slotov introduced me to his regiment. Imagine several hundred young men, generally of good appearance, and a large proportion of whom have a very determined air, but who look more like a band of brigands than a regiment of the line due to their mixture of clothes, hats and arms. They are dressed in tunics, jackets, smocks, blouses or shirts, most of them shamefully torn. They wear an appalling collection of trousers – tight, loose or cut short – of all colours, and through which their bodies can be seen via the numerous holes. Their headwear is a mix of grey, brown, black and green caps; fur, leather or beaver hats; or all sorts of oddities, including square, tricorne, wedding, Tyrolean or priest's hats. Footwear was black boots, bright red,



yellow or leather shoes, felt boots (*valenki*), or shoes with gaiters, in a horrible state, leftover from prehistoric collections. One in nine or ten is barefoot. Here and there a guy with a smile, happy to be presentable in a new outfit with shiny boots: the lucky bugger has killed a prominent communist.

Yet these troops had been fighting for a year, sometimes lacking the clothes to cover their feet in the 40-degree cold⁵ (for a few months, no one had shoes). After having started the Ekaterinburg campaign in September 1918 with 5 cartridges per man and without machine guns, this ragged regiment could now put 70 machine guns, taken from the enemy, into the line.

One of the reasons for these remarkable fighting qualities is both religious and racial solidarity. The regiment is 70 % Muslims (Bashkirs) from the district of Zlatoust, whose inhabitants suffered considerably from the Red detachments. The number of volunteers (200 out of the 900 men in the regiment) is relatively high. The Muslim population had a remarkable solidarity with the Orthodox, whose churches and monasteries they sometimes defended, bringing to their combat some of the holy fury that the excessive denial of religion inspires in the true Muslim: "The unbelievers are guided by a lie. The believers walk with the torch of real faith!"⁶ A young boy said to me: "The Bolsheviks told us that all of Russia must have the same opinions in all things, and that we must therefore sacrifice our own beliefs for this reason. They have taken our parents' wheat and horses, and they want to take our faith too. We will not submit!"

Another reason I believe for the remarkable success of the regiment was the ruthlessness it exercised towards the enemy. Having found officers and comrades murdered in atrocious circumstances, these soldiers used their right of reprisal systematically and without mercy. Their reputation for bravery and harshness was such that there was always a vacuum around them. In that war, the entire tactics of small units consisted of attempts at encirclement: an enemy force, threatened with being cut off from its base by such a regiment, withdrew at once.

The Omsk government was caught between two policies: that of the Cossacks, whose *nagaika*⁷ was contrasted with Bolshevik terror, and a policy based on humanitarian principles and utilitarian considerations, perhaps influenced by foreigners. As I noted this, military prosecutors were arresting and imprisoning many officers who had retaliated against enemy prisoners. Good leaders were thrown into prison for mistreating and killing communists.⁸ If the four Omsk counter-intelligence services had used the same methods – they were safe in doing it their way – against those who were conspiring against the precious lives of the admiral, his ministers and the 2,500 officers in the capital offices, the government would have long since succumbed.

Even the war on the Western Front – a war between more civilised and more morally inclined peoples – had many instances of atrocities which were forced upon men so as not to give the opponent an advantage which he was abusing. In all war, the methods of the harshest and most ruthless adversary have a tendency to become *de jure* and definitive. Only one who feels strong has the right to be generous. The generosity of the weak is never interpreted as a virtue, only as a calculation.

7. – Defensive war

Novo-Torbasli,⁹ 5 June.

The White River (Belaya) separated the opponents for 200 kilometres, and it seems that every Siberian river is an ideal defence line. However the river forms a loop here, cutting a peninsula into our front, which it is

⁵ Fahrenheit, 4° Celsius.

⁶ The only churches that Bolshevik propaganda in Siberia never attacked were the synagogues. The Orthodox churches were mostly abandoned by the Russians with remarkable willingness. In Ufa province, not only the mosques, but the Christian monasteries were defended by the Bashkirs. In March, a Tatar in Ufa who had shops for both icons and linen, did not leave the city when the Reds approached until after he had put the icons into safe keeping. He left the linen behind. On Belebei Island, the Tatars living near a nunnery defended it from the approach of the Reds with their weapons: the Russian peasants had abandoned it.

⁷ The Cossack whip, often used to break up demonstrations and protests under the Tsar.

⁸ Two young officers wrote me letters asking me to intervene on their behalf with General Sakharov: they were threatened with detention as common criminals for having had a Bolshevik speculator beaten up.

⁹ Novyye Turbasly



difficult to defend properly. The enemy occupied – that is, on our bank – this point, which was fortified and hidden behind a forest, and moreover protected by their machine guns on the left bank. They had an excellent observation point on top of a hill, rising steeply from the river.

Opposite, near the village of Krasni-Yar, which they occupied, the enemy had a boat under steam, which our troops had unfortunately left on that bank, and which the forest noted above made it impossible to spot. Our batteries had been given the task of destroying this ship by indirect fire, to prevent it one day being used to transport guns across. Before we used up the 45 shells that had just been brought to us, we needed set up an observation point in the forest that hid the ship from us. To do this would need a hundred determined men, under an energetic leader, but it seems that a while back that resolve had snapped. An order to set fire to the forest was not carried out: “The ground would be too swampy!” Another order: “Push the Reds into the water and install an artilleryman on the bank to direct fire”, was not carried out either, “We do not know the exact numbers of the enemy!” The trenches on the peninsula, which I visited in detail, were separated from the enemy occupied forest by half a kilometre. There was no desire to advance. The artillery did not push forward, the infantry remained on the defensive, and each complained about the other. The spirit of initiative was severely damaged.

To those of my readers who would be disposed to pour scorn on the young officers of the Siberian army, I would point out that no officer on the Western Front had ever found himself in similar circumstances: after the betrayal of Buguruslan, every Russian commander feared being abandoned by his men and delivered up to atrocious torture, while orders from above forbid preventive reprisals.

With orders to retreat being given, there were no more attacks, neither here nor anywhere else. On such a bare front (on both sides), the odds were inevitably in favour of the opponent who attacked, if the other is only determined to hold. So we quietly left this piece of land in our zone in the possession of the enemy, where it is likely a crossing – which everyone fears with a stoic and resigned frame of mind – is already being prepared.

8. – The city of Ufa under a Cossack regime

Ufa, 5th June.

I entered Ufa from the north at the end of the afternoon. I found perfect order, other than a light bombardment to which the Reds subjected the town. In the suburbs – for the most part abandoned – a few families of workers and peasants, quietly seated in front of their houses, waited for the rare soldiers who passed, to question them. The centre of the town was completely abandoned: one’s gaze passed through the empty houses.

At the dwelling I am shown, I find electric light and water in the bathroom. The municipality is in session; an office for government affairs and another for supply issues are in operation; the militia¹⁰ occupied the crossroads; the firemen went down the streets to put out the fires caused by the Red shells. This apparatus of order in a large empty city, this appearance of normal life in a population of workers, under the gaze of Cossacks who are seen circulating everywhere, made one suspect that the *nagaika* and the revolver were not foreign to these sudden conversions. Here is what happened:

The 1st Siberian Cossack Regiment, normally stationed in Omsk, had been sent towards Shishma, to halt the enemy advance there. It found itself facing a mounted detachment, famous for its bravery and cruelty, that of Kachirin.¹¹ It held for 24 hours in front of the great bridge of Dioma, so allowing the pedestrians and

¹⁰ Presumably the town police, renamed.

¹¹ The three Kachirin brothers organised detachments of “Red” Cossacks. Their wealthy Cossack father, ataman of a village in the Urals host and former cornet at the German front, had applied for the post of ataman of the Verkhnyi-Ural district, and failed. *Deinde irae*. A man without convictions – like Golubiev in the Don, etc. – he offered his sword to the Bolsheviks. His three sons, also officers, were not very intelligent people, but like most Cossacks were brutal, ferocious, great drinkers, and understood and loved by their own people. They organised shock detachments which were among the best Trotsky had at the front.



equipment who had been delayed to retreat to the town. During this day, the most sinister scenes were played out.

A swarm of speculators – most of them Israelites – who had come from Siberia to wait here between two fronts for the wave of famine rising from the centre of Russia, made contact with the soldiers, who sold them the army's provisions of flour (240 tons at the station). The enormous quantities of vodka which the admiral's government had prepared in the Siberian cities were the object of desire for all of them. The *Vinni-sklad*¹² management distributed to the soldiers and their friends, within a few hours, a thousand *vedros* (20,000 bottles) of 96% alcohol. Soon there was general drunkenness. Shop fronts were smashed, bandits entered houses and committed robberies and murders. Men, women and children took refuge in the churches to pray. Workers in all the factories stopped work, on the basis of the shelling. The staff of a large insane asylum, doctors and guards, deserted. The fires which broke out everywhere were no longer extinguished, under the pretext that all the horses had been taken away by the "White" army. The local Bolsheviks, faced with this disorder and believing that the Soviet battalions would soon enter, came out of their long hiding. Some of the Reds "*intelligentsia*" spread proclamations acclaiming the Soviet Republic and prepared huge red flags, with "Welcome to the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic!" in colossal white letters. They made contact with the enemy and facilitated the entry of some Bolshevik commissars and commanders in disguise. Towards evening, light signals shone very close to our batteries on top of the station. Our rafts, moored on the right bank, in view of a possible crossing to the other bank, were let loose and carried away by the current. In this pandemonium, small bands of brigands prowled the houses during an interminable dark night.

It was at this point that the Cossacks entered the scene. The 1st Siberian Cossack Regiment had long experience in handling the problems that revolutionaries posed to Russian governments. In a few hours the workers at the waterworks and the power plant had been brought back to their work by platoons of Cossacks perfectly willing to execute them at the slightest sign of refusing to work or sabotage. The doctors of the insane asylum, faced with the alternative of being shot on the spot or continuing their work, obediently lined up, followed by their acolytes. The firemen, under their enormous helmets of polished copper, harnessed themselves instead of horses to the pumps, and went all over to put out the fires – escorted everywhere by taciturn Cossacks. The joyful outbursts of the few but noisy Bolsheviks ceased. Spies, propagators of the new gospel, bandits and speculators, marched, in unbroken lines under the whips of the mounted Cossacks, to deserted places – and were certainly not to be rewarded there. After a day and a half, you could have heard a pin drop in Ufa. There was an order there that it had not known in her most prosperous days. It was as it had been in Warsaw.

But that was not the last of the benefits of the Cossacks. The commander of the town, the very energetic assistant to the head of the 1st Regiment, deemed it necessary to resume "normal" life. Since the town council had been evacuated with all its services, the entire population was summoned, again by the Cossacks. The commander made a speech to this frightened crowd, full of threats and good sense, and in less than an hour, under a beautiful summer sky, appointed a mayor, a municipal council, a regional council (*zemskaia uprava*) and several other committees which were ordered to open their offices without delay.

For my part, I am of the opinion that the Cossacks, in Ufa, gave an excellent example to the democratic regime. They had, without any apparent effort, drawn a social organisation from anarchy, based on the elective system, and supported by total order. It is true that they did not relinquish their powers of control after this great benefit. The militia wore the red shoulder patches of the Siberian Cossacks, and the firing squads continued to organise sinister processions through the streets, day and night – the spectacle of which made even the bourgeois lose their breath.¹³

In civilised societies, we see the force that ensures stability only in the guise of paternal and good-natured city agents of the city, stationed – almost as a sinecure – on street corners. These Siberian Cossacks were their colleagues, and it would be unfair to associate them, both in Russia and in Siberia, with the organisers of mass murders and the murderers of innocent citizens.

¹² Liquor Store.

¹³ The Cossacks shot 670 people in Ufa during their short rule.



However, it was necessary for this brutal, inexorable and – it must be said – sometimes blind force, unleashed upon whole groups of troublemakers, to be well tamed. Whether their leader is His Excellency Volkov or some other formidable Cossack rooted in the methods of force, the head of the government must be so far above and independent of him that a simple gesture of authority – without any balancing act – is enough to make him return to his subordinate role. On both sides of the Asian border, it is the weakness of governments that takes its revenge on the citizens.

9. – The Belaya is crossed

Ufa, 6 June

Yesterday the Belaya, a mighty Siberian river and an almost permanent obstacle, was crossed by the enemy, in front of General Galitsin's headquarters, at the very moment when his staff were reporting to the army commander that the Reds would not pass and that patriots could sleep soundly. Throughout the day, the officers of our 12th division (General Bangerskiy) occupying the southern sector of Ufa, had observed troops and cannon heading northwards. We knew it was therefore there that the fate of the town was to be decided.

The previous night the Reds had advanced their guns, with incredible audacity, to the very edge of the river, from where we drove them back by direct fire. During this hour-long duel, which more or less came to nothing, the enemy made an attempt to cross the river, but it failed thanks to the careful watch of the 13th Regiment.

Some light batteries were placed on top of the station, overlooking the river. I found a magnificent view of the immense meadows of Ufa district from there, all covered with a clear and bushy grass, and flooded by the melting snow. The mighty waters of the Belaya meandered between infrequent woods, and then across the enormous wide stretch of grass, resplendent under a burning sky. Shells were bursting at random on the banks of this river, once so lively but then completely abandoned by shipping, above the once prosperous town, and on the fields that were no longer ploughed.

Our batteries attracted the enemy's fire, especially two heavy guns in the middle of the market in the centre of the town and some batteries behind a ridge overlooking the Belaya. But the enemy seems to have been misled about their locations. Their bombardment criss-crossed the town, bearing no sign of any system. After three days of this no shells had hit our batteries and no soldiers had been killed or wounded. The bourgeoisie was entirely absent. One saw only women and children belonging to the working class, running everywhere, pale and panting, to escape the projectiles of their friends.

This morning the Belaya, an insurmountable obstacle if guarded by good regular troops, was crossed by the enemy at a second point, near the village of Krasni-Yar, exactly in the sector I had visited. The Reds had used the steamer, which we had not succeeded in destroying over four days, to transport 24 guns on our shore by this time.

What lay at the root of these uninterrupted series of daring (if somewhat reckless!) and successful moves on the part of the adversary and the complete negligence, weakness and blindness on the part of our own? Why this sudden reversal of roles? From where did the Bolsheviks get, after such a miserable retreat, this sudden rise in their spirits which is called "high morale", and similarly a confidence in the superiority of their cause? How is it that this tenacious will to win in the Bolshevik leaders was communicated with greater facility to the young peasants, who were less than enthusiastic about the civil war?

The absence of alcoholic drinks among the Reds, the formations of Communist volunteers, the lack of undermining of professional officers, the control of the quartermasters and staffs by political commissars interested in the preservation of their regime – these were all imperceptible factors, each of which seems unimportant and negligible, but which flowed so thoroughly in their system that it led to a superior force and thus our defeats.

10. – Battles without Energy

Stepanovka, 8 June

Three Red regiments had crossed the Belaya and were marching on Ufa. The Army Commander had a manoeuvre group composed of three regiments (29th and 30th infantry and 1st Orenburg Cossacks) under



colonel Larionov, comrade-in-arms of Pepelyaev, Voytsekhovskiy, Grivin, to oppose them. There was a set objective: there was an almost equal force, cornered by a wide river, which needed to be forced back to the other bank.

The salvation of the whole army depended on the outcome of the struggle, and perhaps that of the fatherland. How many compelling reasons to commit all one's forces to the fight! Unfortunately, you can't alter what happens on the battlefield. The opponents and what happens are judged there, and all mistakes and inaccuracies are paid for!

As soon as I left Ufa, I came across a large group of soldiers in rags, led by non-commissioned officers. They are additional troop, who have just been sent to a few regiments at the front, without rifles (although there is no shortage of them), and who have been used for want of anything else better to load the army's provisions into the wagons at the Ufa station. This work finished, or simply interrupted by the approach of the Reds, they were sent back without any indication of what to do.

Colonel Larionov was at Stepanovka. The road leading to it was under enemy fire. Making a diversion to spare our mounts, I met Colonel Larionov as he was on his way to the group's headquarters. A lieutenant-colonel offered to take me to the battlefield. It seemed that we were going to attack! We galloped to arrive in time, and soon outdistanced my orderly, a Serb, whose warrior ardour – contrary to the traditions of his race – diminished at the appearance of a battle.

The battle took place in a valley formed by two huge waves of land parallel to the Belaya. A steep slope descends towards a small stream from the village where found ourselves, and then it rose gently towards a second ridge which covered the horizon, where the enemy were, forming a plain without elevations and two kilometres deep in total. Two small streams and a few long hedges cut it into wide strips, covered with wheat and flowering grasses and dotted with small groves of trees and shrubs. A second village, Gladigeva, below and to the right, whose houses disappear into dark greenery, is the enemy's first objective. Enemy machine-gunners sprayed the valley with bullets at random, in all its width.

As we descended into the plain, we passed before the first stream, our horsemen: a company of mounted scouts and two Cossack squadrons in reserve. Further on there two MG cars which I was told were unusable, and the ammunition wagons for the rifles and machine-guns, hidden behind some bushes. Then a long line of small individual pits, crossing the whole valley, and from which the tired eyes of poorly dressed infantrymen followed us. Behind the isolated farms, which precede the village, some officers of a line regiment in line and a half-squadron of Cossacks hid their horses to protect them from the many stray bullets, whose soft rustling in the grass, or splashing in the ponds and mud puddles, could be heard around us. The inhabitants waited in their cellar-less houses for the end of the battle with a truly Russian obstinacy, but with a heavy heart. From time to time bullets passed through the dwelling, but which they feared abandoning in case of a fire.

Half a kilometre ahead of us, two waves of soldiers passed the village in the direction of the enemy. The enemy fire redoubled in intensity, I saw the men suddenly lie down and then get up after signs or threats from the officers. A slowing down of the movement; then the first wave halting, stops the second. In the village, we found a whole company – new soldiers, some of them unarmed – wandering behind the houses, fearful like sheep. We shouted to them that they must get in line and join their comrades ahead, and we asked where their officers are. They could not tell us where they were. Probably they had simply removed their rank insignia, as I had already seen on occasion, to prevent a worse fate in the event of capture. This is a demonstration of the usefulness of atrocities against those, of course, who do not respond to them.

Our soldiers further on have not eaten for two days, the provisions had been sent to the rear, as an extra precaution, and nobody was bringing them anything. However, I heard them shouting: "Hurrah!", cries that are very weak and almost drowned out by the pawing of the horses, the whistle of bullets, and by other cries coming from the rear that are difficult to understand. Beside us the infantrymen looked on, dazed. On the left, near the ridge that the Reds had approached obliquely, a band of Cossacks awaited the outcome of the battle, thinking to pursue but not to attack.

On the ridge, in front of us, against a blazing sunset, the profiles of the numerous Reds are outlined, accompanied by that of a tall horseman, probably a commissar, or at least a man who is not afraid. There was



a moment of waiting between our advancing waves and the line of Reds, motionless a hundred metres distant, flooding the valley with bullets. Two figures fell, one more, a few soldiers next to them started to flee, the first wave stopped the second, then both disappeared. After a few moments we saw our men emerge here and there from the high grass and, in short intermittent bursts, arrive back behind the advanced posts and the line of trenches. The wounded were, as almost always, abandoned.

It was therefore the time for the Reds to shout “Hurrah!”, and they could have continued their momentum and broken through our lines. But do not forget that these were exactly the same soldiers as ours, neither better nor worse disposed, and that their relative superiority was made up of a number of imponderable factors, which only acted slowly. You don’t expect to see any drama from such weakly inspired troops! As soon as our waves had come in and our machine guns had started firing, the victorious Reds disappeared in turn. Our reserves began to flee. There was nothing more to do, we went with the flow. There were very few wounded, and already some of those fleeing men could have been carried by that sudden and overwhelming fear up to 30 or 40 kilometres to the rear. I can still see the face of a poor devil of a Bashkir peasant, who passed us with his eyes wide and crying in a face dazed by fright, and running breathlessly. We ask him: “Where? Why?” But he heard nothing and continued running without looking.

When we got back to our MG cars, we persuaded the commander to move them forward. He objected that the engines were in a pitiful state and stopped frequently; that the tyres were full of holes and tears; that the cartridges (French or American, I can’t remember) were not suitable for the machine guns; and that all repairs had been impossible for a fortnight as, by one of the inexplicable blunders that we came up against at every moment, the workshop cars had been sent 50 km away. The commander, a captain and officer by trade, hesitated to send his machines forward, but I managed to persuade him to do so. A few glasses of vodka for the driver and the crew, and we were off.

I was placed next to the driver. When we passed our first line, I saw a flash of hope in the eyes of those miserable soldiers. A hundred metres further on, our two machine guns started to fire randomly, each time firing only seven or eight shots, after which a cartridge had to be extracted from the barrel, the base of which had become stuck. But this was enough. As the evening fell, in the distance we saw multiple black dots run and become invisible in the high grass. Twice our engine stopped: we had to get out and start it again. If the Reds had some initiative, it would have been easy for them to put us in a bad spot, but they are as sheep-like as ours. However, the driver refused to enter Gladigeva village, claiming that we would not be rescued by the infantry if we got into danger. I said that a concerted advance of the machine guns and infantry would definitely decide the battle, and I made an effort to do so with the commander of the machine guns, whose name I shall not mention. He continued his abundant libations and would not listen. His complexion was inflamed and he decided that his two machines would return to the rear: “First we’ll rest, then tomorrow we’ll see”.

So operations stopped for the night. The main culprit was the commander of the group, Colonel Larionov, whose place was here, in the middle of the troops, and not among the useless paperwork of his ridiculous “staff”. Having made a name for himself by organising a detachment of volunteers at the very beginning of the Siberian affair with the help of the Czechs. He should have continued fighting at the front among his soldiers, since the circumstances had hardly changed. He was wrong to restrict his action to tactical orders, without controlling and forcing their execution by his direct command of his troops, whom he knew to be commanded by young gymnasium students, indecisive and incapable of transmitting to their soldiers the command’s will to win.

But back home, everyone was already rudely happy that the enemy had withdrawn a little more than ours. This was a great result. Let’s leave it at that for today!

These simultaneous retreats, satisfying both adversaries, occurred frequently in this war. One can easily recognise in them the classic prototype of simultaneous mutual retreats, which took place in 1480 by the armies of Tsar Ivan III, and of Khan Akhmet.¹⁴ These armies had been separated for a fortnight by the swift waters of the Oka River. In a single night of terrible cold the Oka was covered with ice. This unforeseen event

¹⁴ Traditionally called “The Great Stand on the Ugra River”.



opened up the possibility for the two armies, which had long been lined up in battle order and incited to holy war by their clergy, to carry out their warlike intentions. But, panic-stricken at the same moment, they both fled without looking back, and only stopped at Sarai on the Aktuba for one and Moscow for the other. Russia was liberated from the Mongols, and by a miracle.

Unfortunately, the Red hordes, led with more method than those of Khan Akhmet, will certainly return tomorrow to the advance.

11. – The soldier is hungry

Maximovka, 7/8 June

Night fell, and a deep stillness reigned on the “battlefield”. Between the three Red regiments, who had to exploit their sensational crossing of the Belaya, and the three “White” ones, who had to drive them back to the opposite bank, there remained a neutral zone of at least three kilometres width through the night. From the dark clouds a warm, penetrating rain fell; the drops could be heard falling on the paths. There was nothing in this indecisive and melancholy landscape that reminded one of war. The picturesque profiles of the Cossack horsemen, lance on the saddle, so ardent in pursuit and retreat, had long since passed away, and had disappeared into the darkness. Followed by my Serbian orderly, whom I found safe and well rested, three kilometres from the front, I rode towards the Bashkir village of Maximovka, situated six kilometres to the rear.

There I was given a place in a small peasant’s room together with a military priest and three officers, which whole regiments seem to have passed. The dirtiness of the place and the abundant vermin forced us to go and lie down in the open air on the straw, near a fire which Cossacks had lit. The night air was deliciously fresh and fragrant with the scent of the flowering meadows. From the south-west a hurricane of detonations seemed to descend from the burning clouds. Towards morning we learnt that whole streets of the town of Ufa, set on fire by the Red shells, have been consumed. The Cossacks having withdrawn, the firemen had immediately stopped work.

In the first clear light of the morning grey shadows appeared. A hand slipped through a half-open window, opened it and a plaintive voice cry: “Woman, give me some bread, I have nothing to eat!” We shouted that we didn’t have any ourselves, that we have to look elsewhere. The same cry is repeated at every house. They are young Bashkir boys involved in a war between Russians by distant and ancient historical entanglements. They were lively and agile. They had shown bravery and a real attachment to their leaders many times. These bright-eyed and swarthy faced children had so joyously set out – two months ago – to conquer the city of Ufa. Now, poorly clothed and armed, abandoned to their sufferings and to the vengeance of the enemy – and worse if wounded – bore a disproportionate share of the sufferings and privations of this civil war, and now seemed to be overcome by weariness and to have given up the game. Their plaintive cries filled the night, in vain. The populace refused them their bread. And we ourselves would have to show a few notes of good money to obtain milk and a crust, at a high price.

Let us not forget that these inhabitants were peasants, selfish and independent. After having made a spontaneous gesture of generosity when our troops put an end to the unbearable Bolshevik methods, they soon fell back into their natural political indifference. To the Reds who passed through these villages as inexorable masters, they submitted with a whimper. We ended up being treated as usurpers. None of our officers thought of opposing the ruthless refusals of the inhabitants, to search of their cellars and cupboards and confiscate. Were our young officers, barely out of the sweet habits of family life, reluctant to use strong-arm tactics? There was no excuse for their weakness. The Cossacks were never short of food for themselves and their horses.

12. – New Retreat to the Ufimka River

Shaksha, 8 June

In the morning I ran to put my luggage in safety in General Voytsekhovskiy’s train. He told me that, since the manoeuvre of the previous day had failed, his Corps will withdraw to the line of the river Ufimka by evening. I immediately set off again towards the battlefield.



Towards midday I found Colonel Larionov in Maximovka, accompanied by the commander of the 8th Division, about to leave the village. He complained that he had been informed too late of the enemy's flight, and that he had not been able to advance his regiment until around dawn. The 3rd Regiment (whose impotent effort I had yesterday observed) carried its lines forward four kilometres, without the slightest resistance from the Reds. By establishing lines of scouts up to the river, it had cut off the three Red regiments from the town of Ufa, and would be in a position to push back the enemy, if this advance, 'had not exhausted its momentum and initiative'. Red machine-gun fire stopped it definitively on the outskirts of the village of Alexandrovka. In the meantime, the 32nd Regiment, operating on its right, had fallen back. No effort was made to recover. We continued to fiddle around here at the headquarters, instead of going out to fight. Instead of making a defensive hook, and bringing the 32nd Regiment back into the fight, the 3rd Regiment was allowed to withdraw to the positions of the day before – which were untenable – and the entire advantage of the day was lost.

The rain fell in sheets. The last of the maps were removed from the walls and the boxes were loaded onto the carts. A few more phone calls to the headquarters and we packed up the phones. Having lost contact with the troops, we had lost confidence in them, and we feared that a sudden flight would allow the Red Cavalry into this village. The last hopes were dashed, the last impetus was extinguished. And the worst thing is that everyone felt a little responsible for those misfortunes. After believing for several months in easy and forthcoming victories, for a month now we had become almost used to discouragement. The officers, among whom I find men of value from the old army, no longer recognise themselves in the present war, which reminds them of some cruel memories of the year 1917, and none of the retreat of 1916. Faces were flushed, there were gestures of utter discouragement. If we couldn't hold out in front of the Belaya River, which is a powerful river, where could we stop the enemy? The two infantry regiments – the Cossacks disappeared yesterday – will hold back the Reds for a few more hours, and then withdraw to occupy new positions on the Ufimka towards evening. For how long? Nervous, furious, cursing at the Devil, the staff saddled up, and faded into the storm.

I continued my journey towards Stepanovka, where I found more or less the same spectacle as the previous day, with the difference that the armoured cars had retired – to rest – and that the Reds had brought artillery. We couldn't do anything about it, as the artillery of the corps was in position around Ufa. Our soldiers had just received a ration of bread, after having eaten nothing for three days. I told the commander of the 3rd Regiment – who knew nothing about it – that Colonel Larionov had withdrawn.

While we were talking in the street, with our eyes fixed on the valley, a tall old peasant approached us, surrounded by some soldiers. The soldiers complained that he had refused to prepare the samovar for them. But in a loud voice he said to us:

"I am willing to give them tea and even more than that. But I told them: first chase away the Reds who are there in front of us, and then you will have everything you want. Tell me, was I right?"

He looked for approval from all of us. No one answered. The officers shrugged and left the village. A mounted scout was sent to convey the order to retreat to the troops.

In front of us was the same scenario as yesterday. There was simply more activity. The continual crackling of rifle fire contrasted with the apparent stillness and emptiness of the meadows. The soldiers that the landscape had absorbed in great numbers slowly detached themselves from the pits, folds of ground, groves, brushwood, farms, and sheds and flowed towards the paths. Only the front lines remained in position. A few senior officers, then the mounted scouts, the machine-gun ammunition wagons, the reserve battalion, and from the combatants came the wounded, with weapons on their shoulders – though so few in number for this part of the front, where the outcome had decided the fate of the whole army.

Our machine guns, like those of the enemy, were heard intermittently. Finally, when our regiment had withdrawn almost entirely behind the hill, our first lines rose in their turn; they had held the enemy for half an hour. Immediately the noise of the battle changed: all the enemy machine guns raged with a terrible and continuous noise on our infantry who were running at full speed. The enemy artillery, which had been silent until now – probably to surprise our machine guns, if they came back into action – bombarded the roads. This



time I saw our soldiers fall and there was no fire to protect them. They scattered in panic, slipped into the wheat, came out, climbed the slopes at the top, threw themselves into the tall grass, and returned to the ridge behind the village in a hundred different places. The Reds were content to shoot: with no pursuit! Thus our retreat was carried out in the greatest order, and only when a few well-directed shells burst on the road that descended towards Maximovka was the calm broken, and the horses galloped off.

The foot withdrew over the Shaksha railway bridge, the crews were taken to the other bank by a ferry attached to a steamer which crossed and recrossed the rapid current of the Ufimka night and day. The heavy batteries were put in position on the left bank, which was very steep. The scouting parties set off along the river. And just as our heavy guns fired their first shots at the enemy from a distance of 6 kilometres, General Voytsekhovskiy's train slowly left the front line.

At the same time, the great iron bridge at Dioma was blown up, and the wreckage of numerous wagons was added to this destruction and rolled into the gaping hole. The retreat thus entered its final phase. With this admission of the impossibility of a return, it seems likely to continue indefinitely, and perhaps with no resolution.

