

The War in Russia and Siberia

Ludovic H. Grondijs

Chapter IV

The Retreat Continues

1. – The Enemy have the Initiative

Ekaterinburg, 23 June 1919

The Gaida army was within 130 kilometres of Kazan two months ago – the possession of which would have assured us of the Volga, and probably the link with Denikin – but was dragged down in the end by the failures of the Khangin army.

Gaida's troops had occupied a line passing through Glazov, Urzhum and Malmyzh at the time of the evacuation of Ufa, and had hoped to take advantage of this advanced position to fall onto the enemy's flank. But a similar threat emerged against his own left flank. The numerous enemy armies were led by wise strategists: Samoilov, Parski, and preceded by a powerful stream of agitators who pushed on the Red soldiers, preached to the populace, and here and there corrupted the Siberian soldiers.

A regiment under General Pepelyaev, a valiant and energetic leader, went over to the enemy. The young Siberian classes, ill-armed against the relentless Red propaganda, had been sustained by military successes and the enthusiasm of the villages that welcomed them as liberators: now this was all gone.

The enemy tried to break through our lines near Krasnoufimsk. The Perm to Kungur to Ekaterinburg railway, which ran parallel to the front, was in danger. The staff countered this threat with a lateral attack by a newly formed and highly confident assault corps. It was placed under the orders of General Grivin, commander of the 4th Corps, which occupied the Krasnoufimsk sector.

2. – Urals Landscapes

Ekaterinburg-Krasnoufimsk, June 27/28, 1919

At the beginning of the war, the Kazan-Ekaterinburg railway project was only finished between Kazan and Krasnoufimsk. As the Siberian front advanced, General Grivin had rails laid on the embankments already prepared between Ekaterinburg and Krasnoufimsk. These embankments were not very safe, the heavy rains of the previous days had dug small waterways under the rails which, in some places, were almost suspended in the air. Even travelling at a slow speed (3 to 5 kilometres per hour) we felt as if we were shaking on a choppy sea.

But as we crawled through these deserted lands, what splendid views opened up to our eyes! Here the Ural mountains have different beauties than between Chelyabinsk and Ufa. There sometimes, as near Zlatoust, the peaks rise up, with steep slopes and the bare stone of real rocks reaching up to the sky. There too human works, such as aqueducts, bridges, factories and mines along with numerous towns and villages, interrupt the aspect of eternal nature at every step.

Here there is none of the grandiose effects of form or colour that are to be found elsewhere in the capricious profiles of the high peaks, in the purified air of the great heights, in the gold of a light that has only passed through the upper layers of the atmosphere. The rock has disappeared completely under an abundance of vegetation, and the Urals seem to continue here, in broad undulations, the immense green plain of Siberia. The valleys are filled with endless forests, where for hundreds of kilometres the trees follow one another, oaks, beeches, firs, birches, lindens, larches, with an isolated house of a railway guard only a couple of times each day. On the slopes of the hills and mountains are ever-present fir and birch trees, and even in the crevices of the rocks which, here and there cross the landscape in long veins or wide patches, there are frail but tenacious birch trees clinging to the hard stone.



Asleep under the harsh light of day, the beauty of the sites awakens in the evening. There are no precipices with torrents rushing in foaming avalanches. But gigantic amphitheatres gradually descend from the high peaks towards smooth rivers, which flow rapidly into lakes, which we only caught a glimpse of as broken outlines. And now and then the range of hills gently opens, and a broad valley runs to distant meadows, where the mists glow in the sunset rays in the warm evenings.

Near the countless streams, whose murmur fills the silent nights, the meadows are covered with flowers, sparkling in the shade of the trees. Blue bellflowers, exquisite scarlet orchids, and roses that follow the course of the waters, and make a thousand red flames glow in the bushes. Man seems to be absent from this paradise, and nothing disturbs the noisy happiness of the birds, wild and restless. But sometimes their chorus turned into shrill calls, and faded away in the high grass. Above us, an eagle spiralled upwards, hovered for a while above our train – with its pointed beak pointing downwards – and then suddenly followed the course of a transverse valley.

In these landscapes, where nature by its relative gentleness seems ready for human endeavour, men seem absorbed by their surroundings and forgotten by history. We rarely saw the native Russians pass, solitary and indifferent, giants barely bent as if under enormous weights. Against the dark depths of the forests they had that look made famous by Lev Nikolaievitch¹. A woollen blouse covered the powerful chest, the wide trousers disappeared in high boots. One could see strongly drawn features between the unkempt hair and the shaggy beard, and often eyes like those hidden ponds in the forests were under a beautiful forehead which did not see the sun. One thinks when seeing him passing by, with his impassive and fierce independence, almost isolated from progress, of the ancient masters of the Russian land. They have kept all the forms of the lives of their forefathers, far from the great roads along which cultures travel, since the birth of the European nations. Subjugated, driven from his fields, sold, oppressed, exploited, or bound by hard slavery – sometimes by foreign invasions, sometimes by the machinations or caprices of their own princes – they have never lost the notion of their rights to freedom. Escaping their chains, they have preserved in the deserted forests the worship of the imperishable Slavic idols, and their attachment to their lands.

3. – A Bellows – General Grivin

Krasnoufimsk, 1st July 1919

A small characterless town with its large “promenade” of three lines of lime trees along a small muddy river, the Ufimka. But far from it, and the vast ponds covered with lotuses through which the river slowly drags itself, my carriage stopped in a birch wood, where we found a little coolness from the clear sky which overwhelmed us with heat and light.

I didn't need to go to Corps headquarters to get closer to the front. The front was approaching me. Half a day after my arrival in Krasnoufimsk, General Grivin, commander of the 4th Corps, who had been entrusted with the defence of this critical front, entered the station.

General Grivin was an officer thoroughly familiar with Siberian guerrilla warfare, of which he possessed all the qualities and defects. He belonged to that small group of meritorious officer who, soon after the appearance of Semenov, inaugurated a second effort to liberate Siberia, under the wing of the Czechs. Grivin organised one of the first Russian battalions to fight under Gaida, and earned his senior ranks on the battlefields around Perm. Cold and phlegmatic by nature, a brave leader, sleeping in his uniform, with no gentleness for civilians, full of prejudice and indulgence for his men. He personified the true Russian *grogard* of the Beresina and Plevna – fabulous in the attack, terrible during the waiting.²

Foreign officers complained about his “old regime methods”. He publicly lambasted a railway technician, and the affair made a noise only because it illustrated a conflict of opinion about democratic discipline. This “*natchalnik distants*” or technician, in charge of a certain stretch of the railway, had constantly put up mute resistance to Grivin's orders by things like refusing to make his workers work at night. The Corps advanced

¹ Leo Tolstoy.

² His comrade in arms Voytsekhovskiy, younger than him but who Kolchak had made his superior during the retreat, had Grivin coldly executed for refusing to obey, in October 1919. [Actually November]



with enthusiasm, but the construction of the railway did not keep pace, and transports arrived only with difficulty. Grivin blasted the man publicly, placed 3,000 prisoners of war at his disposal, and threatened him with death if his work was not completed on schedule. Fifteen days later, 20 kilometres of track had been laid, and twelve wooden bridges built.

General Grivin was in this symbolic case (more frequent than foreigners liked to suppose) the disciple of Gaida, whose military successes in Siberia were greatly facilitated by the extreme harshness that this improvisational, but brilliant and cheerful leader, showed towards all hesitations, delays and sabotage which could compromise the outcome of operations. Czechs and Russians alike liked the spirit of justice with which he would happily put a revolver to the forehead of any battery commander, engineer or mechanic, who did not bring all the zeal required in his cooperation to military undertakings. Troops who place their efforts and life at the disposal of such a leader are grateful to him for feeling that he protects them against a hundred weaknesses or ill-will which could render its sacrifices useless.

The Russians have a slow but easily inflammable nature, forgiving their most implacable leaders their harshness, by which they feel pushed towards great destinies.

4. – Drunken scenes – Fanfares

Krasnoufimsk, 1 July

My *provodnik*,³ who I sent into town to do some shopping, returned with the news that scenes of serious disorder were taking place there. At the same time a dozen soldiers arrived with a 50-*vedro* (bucket) cylinder of alcohol intended for our headquarters. Before loading it into one of our wagons, they drew a full glass and drank it under my window. I ran to warn General Grivin that his soldiers were getting drunk next to his train – he didn't seem in the least bit shocked – and that he'd better send a *komando* into town to restore order. I jumped into the saddle and arrived at about the same time as the officer and the five men which the general had sent at once.

In Krasnoufimsk, as in all other Siberian towns, there is a *vinni-sklad* (liquor shop), which the admiral's government had ordered to be reopened. After the responsible officials had fled, the soldiers took it over, under the benevolent and covetous eyes of the military authority. First the Cossacks, who broke the seals, then the soldiers who had come from all over, and finally the peasants arrived in a mob with bottles, buckets and barrels on carts, swearing and grumbling, were lined up by the non-commissioned officers in a long queue, and were each waiting their turn.

People started drinking in the street. Soon the pavements were covered with abominable drunkards. Others, more resistant and more enterprising, smashed the shop fronts that the refugees had abandoned, and sold the various articles to the peasants.

The gendarmes succeeded in bringing some order to the situation. The drunken soldiers were carried into the houses, the looters were chased away, the *vinni-sklad* was closed. Everyone looked at me coldly: it seemed to be my fault that paradise was closing.

However, the transport of barrels and cylinders of alcohol to the station continued, and I saw them loaded onto cars, going in all directions: the various staffs are stocking up.

In the afternoon, General Grivin has alcohol distributed among the drivers, mechanics and soldiers of our train. Each group of 15 to 16 men received – daily from this point onward – a “quarter” of 96% alcohol, which made twelve litres of 40% vodka. So from then on, I saw everyone drunk every night. The “HQ railway brigade” staggered around our wagons. The soldiers of the general's personal guard were celebrating with the peasant women who had come from all over. I saw them dancing in their torn clothes, then falling like a tree in the grass, or going away into the forest with their companions, screaming and shouting. In the morning, they were picked up from the trees, and they were returned to the wagons, dead drunk, dragged by their legs.

³ Guide, escort.



In the evening, noisy and joyful trumpets burst out nearby. Everyone got out of the cars, people ran around asking questions, and there were gatherings of people ready to welcome – after the uninterrupted calamities of a whole month – the optimistic news of success at the front. But soon the curious, after having been informed, dispersed: it was General Gaida, commander of the army, visiting General Grivin.

The very active Colonel Lubignac came to offer General Grivin the some help from the French. An officer, an NCO and a soldier, equipped with machine guns, were willing to organise a ‘shock’ detachment, under the command of the French officer. I feared that this eager help, which was moreover coldly welcomed, came too late. I had little hope by this point.

5. – Human Misery

Krasnoufimsk, 2 July

On this day the front moved 15 to 20 kilometres closer, and in several places the enemy had crossed the Iren' River. The staff would remain in place until the last moment but the distressed population, supported up to this point by foolish hope, was running to find places in the last trains that are going any distance, and into which were thrown the equipment and provisions gathered for the advance long ago.

The same desperate scenes that I had witnessed for a month were repeated here. The bourgeois, peasants, prisoners of war, women and children were piled up on the platforms, between the carts, the cannons and the ammunition boxes, under a burning sun.

A group of four priests were seated between military carts, carrying nothing but a few bags for luggage, and presented the image of general misery. Draped in their shabby cassocks they chatted amongst themselves, without turning their gaze for a moment to the other inhabitants of the platform, from which they are separated by only the four the wheels on the cart. Bareheaded and wearing long, unkempt beards, like the Evangelists, like most of them they obviously belonged to the proletariat of the clergy. They were of simple intelligence; being peasants themselves, they must have led the life and probably had the tastes of their villagers. Having neither the consolations of the bourgeois nor the taste for martyrdom, they nonetheless represented the old faith against Bolshevism, that delirious religion of the masses which was approaching.

The most unfortunate, in this prolonged war, were not the soldiers who, despite being poorly clothed and neglected by an evil step-mother of an administration, could even during the retreats find places to sleep and something to eat. In these small provincial towns there was no forethought by the military authorities and no action by the powerful guilds of civil servants for the distressed population. No luggage cars were available for the refugee families. Groups belonging to the *intelligentzia* settled in a sort of tent, sewn around a heavy artillery piece, which they were determined to defend. Two young girls, immediately recognisable as “institute girls”, sitting on a platform among open-air shell cases, barricaded behind their suitcases, tried to defend the entrance to their nest against an invasion of unimaginable criminal types and idlers, who with grunts and irresistible force pushed their way on. The unfortunate women, their eyes glazed over and their faces screwed up, were suddenly overwhelmed and took flight and to seek some kind of protection elsewhere.

In the autumn of 1916 I witnessed the terrible spectacle of the evacuation of the population from the Polish and Lithuanian provinces. That evacuation was imposed for military and political considerations, and the inhabitants of the villages submitted when forced and often recalcitrantly. I remember the improvised cemeteries in the middle of the forests and in the middle of the countryside, for the old people and children died *en route*, and whose groups of crosses cut from green branches marked the stages of a horrible exodus. But those horrors seemed muffled by the clamour of the universal conflagration.

How much more impressive is the flight of an entire population, leaving their homes freely and spontaneously! What deep and irresistible fear pushed those thousands of people, laden only with bags and hand luggage, to abandon their possessions to looting and burning: the landlords their country houses, the merchants their shops full of goods, the petty bourgeoisie, the peasants and many workers, the furniture inherited from their ancestors and their fruit gardens?



The Hungarian prisoners of war, rightly subjected to special treatment, were sent away from the line of combat. The Germans and Austrians, deeply neutral now in the civil war, would be occupied until the last moment with the work of destruction and the evacuation of material.

6. – The Shock Units⁴

Here is the origin of the Russian “shock units”: In May 1917, Bolshevik propaganda had begun to empty the Russian fronts. Captain Negentsov, belonging to Kornilov’s staff, organised two detachments of volunteers, which were called battalions in accordance with the usual military terminology. Negentsov chose the best of the volunteers, who had come from various Russian units, after a month of strict observation. These soldiers were almost all already decorated and had without exception fought against the Germans and Austrians. They “dedicated themselves to death” and were given – in order to distinguish them from mobilised men – special and soon famous insignia: a skull and crossbones on black and red chevrons. The two *udarni-bataliona* by themselves determined the outcome of the battle near Stanislaw, which opened the road to Galicia.

Kerensky did not allow these famous units to multiply. However, Negentsov’s example – he himself fell gloriously in front of Ekaterinodar – was soon followed by many officers, albeit less methodically.

Although less brilliant than Negentsov’s battalions, detachments of *Udarniki*, forerunners of the “White Partisans”, which were now to be born on Russian territory, generally fought well and history will remember them fondly.

The civil war lacked patriotic stimuli. The ardour of the troops could only be maintained by strong propaganda, and by special volunteer organisations. For this purpose Trotski had at his disposal both old Red detachments reorganised into regular regiments and new special detachments. Regiments 288 and 289 (former detachments from the cities of Bryansk and Kursk) were examples of the first category, the Kachirin detachment of the second.

The Siberian government, allowing itself to be inspired by the English mission, seemed to want to resort to the same expedient. It decided to dress in the fine equipment that General Knox brought with him, not the ragged, hardened troops who had conquered Siberia, but the youngest class. Convinced – the conviction of quartermasters – that being well armed and properly fed that these mobilised peasants would form an elite corps, the black and red chevrons of the *Udarniki* were stuck on their left sleeves, and in certain groups the skulls of the old veterans of 1917. One particularly well-groomed regiment, which made a most admirable impression on the elegant society of the city of Ekaterinburg at the parade ground, was given the name “General Gaida’s Immortal Regiment” before its members had even smelled gunpowder. The ladies were excited at the sight of the handsome young officers who had allowed themselves to be incorporated into it, after delaying enlisting for a year, applauded its name, which even the oldest Russian regiments – the Preobrazhenski and Ismailovski – had never carried. Serious people – very few in number – thought they were watching vaudeville.

7. – The Immortal Regiment and Similar Ones

Achitskoe, July 4, 1919

The 3rd Division, commanded by Rakitin, was astride the Kungur-Ekaterinburg road. It was flanked to the north by the Immortal Regiment and to the south by the rest of the shock corps.

A heavy yellow dust floated in a windless atmosphere. On the road itself, between triple rows of trees, an interminable military procession moved on: the infantry reserves with their irregular and dispersed march, the impassive and meticulously aligned squadrons, the batteries, barrels down, and the innumerable carts forming the train of an entire army corps. And no one is surprised by this retreat which has become a permanent fixture. Russian phlegm sometimes slows down the advances, but it always leads the retreats admirably.

Finally, at Achitskoe, I found Captain Rakitin, commander of the 3rd Division. The situation in this sector of the front seemed to have entered a tragic and probably definitive phase. During a manoeuvre to envelop two

⁴ Grondijs uses the word “attack”, which is a legitimate translation, but the usual word for them in English is “shock”.



enemy regiments, the Immortal Regiment, whose task it was to remain in its positions, suddenly gave way. Cavalry detachments, sent out to determine its current position, reported pieces of it up to 35 kilometres away. Enemy scouts were entering through the gaps they had left in our front.

Rakitin had grouped three regiments in a semi-circle around the village. General Grivin, who hoped to close the gap with a cavalry division that had been placed at his disposal, ordered the 3rd Division to remain in its positions.

At nightfall, our machine gun crackled, three kilometres from our headquarters. A slight scandal in the street: a colonel and three junior officers, drunk, pushed passers-by. They were the head of the 57th Regiment and his officers, who had managed to get hold of government alcohol.

A small group of soldiers belonging to the Immortal Regiment, led by two young officers, passed the pennant of our division without coming to ask for instructions from the HQ. They were called back and subjected to sarcastic remarks. On the run since midday, they had gathered somewhere, and they walked, tired but not glorious, over mountains and roads, with the magnificent insignia of "those who have dedicated themselves to death". It must be admitted: if their regiment retreating without loss, did not achieve immortality, it will not be the fault of its men and officers: they have done everything possible to achieve it.

Achitskoe, 5 July 1919

At 4 a.m. the bombardment started again. Following the road, which led to a valley, I found our officers and soldiers lying in small individual pits, the long series of which crossed a wheat field. Everyone was at his post. The officers were dirty and dishevelled, the soldiers in rags. They show little spirit after the incessant retreats but their obedience is, under the circumstances, an invaluable quality. The Russian soldier does not need superb costumes to fight well, and it is even wrong to deviate too much from the national uniforms, the long breeches, the high boots with thin soles, and the broad blouse made of a strong and rough fabric, but which suits his coarsely cut and solid body well. Perhaps also the English tunics, more coquettish and neat, by transforming him into an object of parade, pampered by the staffs, have freed him from the hardships and miseries of the front, and attached him – more than is allowed to a Russian soldier – to life.

These *sans-culottes*, who have been fighting for a year, and who are often left without bread and without the smallest comforts of life, were once again being sent to the firing line without arms. The division in which I found myself received, on 15 May, 2,100 men to complete its strength who had up till then been employed on the work of the Sarapul–Krasnoufimsk railway. They arrived not only without rifles, but for the most part had never held any in their hands. On 1 July, Captain Rakitin's division received another 1,500, better trained, but still without rifles. And the time had passed when this heroic and admirable Russian soldier could be seen following the advancing waves under the artillery barrage, unarmed but waiting to collect the rifles from his dead and wounded comrades, so that he could in his turn fight for his mother, the Most Great and Holy Russia.⁵

In the 3rd Division, Captain Rakitin showed me, in one regiment, 6 machine guns, in two others 3 and 4 in good condition. For the last six months they had been asking in vain for spare parts for those that were defective. The men, like a large proportion of the officers, are suffering terribly from scabies, having never received the underclothes sent by Omsk without checking that they were distributed. For the last six months the whole corps had received for its officers only one thousand pairs of braces as clothing: the rest disappeared between Omsk and the front.⁶

⁵ The scandalous negligence – or worse – of the quartermaster's services can be better understood if one knows that Kolchak's army had a surplus of 50,000 rifles.

⁶ 40,000 collections of effects and cloth for 30,000 outfits were sent from Omsk to one corps. None of it had arrived. The quartermaster's office sent 300,000 pairs of shoes from Omsk to the army, most of which were sold *en route*.



No more sugar or tobacco, since we were withdrawing and the enemy's provisions no longer fell into our hands. Some officers have managed to obtain small quantities from civilian relatives who have bought some from the army quartermasters.⁷

In the higher ranks, promotions and decorations are not given either, highlighting the difference between those who acted, and were living proof of the confraternity between the troops who suffered and sacrificed, and the authorities who watched, observed and encouraged.

Captain Rakitin, appointed to the command of his division for brilliance in action, has worn the insignia of his rank still – after one year of hard and dedicated service. The six or seven proposals by General Grivin for the rank of lieutenant-colonel remained unanswered. On the other hand, a lieutenant-colonel, commanding a regiment of the 3rd Division, and thus serving under the orders of Rakitin, proposed to the HQ for the rank of colonel, immediately received his brevet. As for the *praporshchiks*, on whom the entire weight of the war rested, for them there were neither promotions nor decorations. They knew perfectly well that these favours were reserved for their comrades in Omsk, Irkutsk, Harbin and Vladivostok.

The leader of the regiment that I found on the road to Kungur, overrun by the enemy on both sides, at his post, is one of the thousand lost children of the army, who are forgotten in a position that few aspire to. A former soldier of 1914, promoted to *praporshchik* after a number of brilliant actions, he seemed to me to personify the energetic, healthy, ambitious class, in close contact with the lower strata of the populace, ready to acclaim any regime ready to abandon certain detestable privileges and to destroy certain brotherhoods in the army, and which could usefully be contrasted with the class of communists, which constitutes the strength of the Bolshevik army.

It was he and his comrades, dirty, disgusting, scabby, without any of the comforts of life, neglected during transport, ill-treated in the regiment, and, if wounded, ill-treated on the operating table, by doctors to whom neither instruments nor medicines were supplied. It was these mangy dogs of the regime who are its only support, and in whom we have succeeded in extinguishing, by a long series of faults and negligence, the sacred fire which the Czechs had kindled, and which an ardent and energetic youth had maintained in the troops.

8. – We'll get them anyway! – Why did the *Udarniki* Retreat? – Conversation between Former Colleagues

lalima, 5 July 1919

Finally, at 8 a.m., General Grivin authorised the retreat of the three regiments in position in front of Achitskoe. The manoeuvre in which General Gaida had assigned such an important role to the shock corps, was therefore abandoned. Tomorrow they would try a strong blow towards Kungur, which General Pepelyaev will direct towards the south-west, and another in the same direction, but starting from the railway between Kungur and Ekaterinburg. At the same time a whole cavalry division will be thrown into the forest region north of Achiskoe.

These great projects from above are remarkably well received by our officers. Hearts are rekindled by the new hopes that other troops in other sectors of the front inspire.

“What a great manoeuvre! Why won't it work?”

“The Reds are finished this time. You will see some remarkable things again!”

But we don't feel in any better shape to fight.

“Us, what could we do, with three or four machine guns per regiment!” Already discounting the inevitable success somewhere in the North, they are preparing for a further retreat in our sector, and they respond to my sarcastic observations:

“All this means nothing. We may well retreat another thousand kilometres. Then it will be their turn: we'll put our foot up their rear for two thousand.”

⁷ Of a huge consignment of tobacco, bought in Kharbin for the front, 85% was sold on the way by the officers conducting the transport, and the rest was taken by headquarters. And so on.



Joyful music comes up from the valley: *Stenko Razin*, *Alla Verdi*, *Manchurian Hills*, *Weapons Shining in the Sun*, etc., all in turn. Does this mean success, a reason for joy? On the contrary: it is the 10th Regiment that is approaching, brass in the lead, and the only regiment of our division that has experienced an involuntary retreat,⁸ and thus has been pushed away from the front. The bugles burst forth, the clarinets whistle, the drums rattle, the onlookers run over in wonder, and even the peasant woman who serves us, in tears because the Reds will take away her last cows, wipes her tears and smiles.

Well, this incomprehensible good humour was perhaps the best thing about those sad circumstances. If optimism in adversity generally hides blindness or cowardice, we can at least take comfort in it: spinelessness saves from despair, and spirits remain intact.

Towards midday, two cavalry regiments passed northwards to take up useless fighting positions. All along the roadway, the field kitchens and hundreds of saucepans, on small fires, spread delectable odours. Coming from God knows where, without bags or guns, the young and hearty soldiers of the Immortal Regiment were seated throughout the groups of our *sans-culottes*. They had thrown away the strong, solid English shoes with their powerful but hard soles, which broke the skin of their feet, and they wore, as long as they could get them, simple "*valinki*" or "*lapti*".⁹ Some of them wear only underwear.

"Do you think, they tell me, that we want to fall into the hands of the Bolsheviks in these new costumes, wearing the insignia of the *Udarniki*?"

And this is the explanation for the enigma which an English major, a brave officer with no experience of the Russians, and directly to the Shock Corps, asked me:

"Why is it that these young and strong men, who are well equipped like the best European troops, behave in such an unexpected way?"

I answered him:

"These poor mobilised men, who left without enthusiasm and were by no means prepared for martyrdom, were promoted to heroes by the quartermasters, and acclaimed for bravery which the elegant society of Perm and Ekaterinburg had decided for them. They understood well once they reached the front – and moreover Bolshevik propaganda made them understand it – what the English uniforms, and above all the black and red chevrons and the skulls, would mean for them if they fell into the hands of the enemy. The latter sometimes forgave the Siberian army conscripts for fighting against "their class", but they doubtless prepared new tortures for these "volunteers", these "heroes", these "regenerators of Russia", ready to "succumb rather than give in". Thus, by theatrically adorning these unfortunate people for heroic sacrifices, they set them up them for ignominious running away.

Bisertscoe, 6 July 1919

This morning, General Grivin tried to regroup his forces. About 30 men had just disarmed the Immortal Regiment. The 1st Regiment of the Shock Corps, which had behaved a little better – its soldiers wore the black and red chevrons, but not the skulls – was posted along the left bank of the Bisert as far as Krasnoufimsk. The 4th Cavalry Division, tasked yesterday with replacing the Immortal Regiment, was met by machine-gun fire, and has turned back.

At 11 a.m. I visited the unfortunate headquarters of the Shock Corps, which, instead of remaining among the soldiers to inspire them according to the traditions of the *Udarniki*, took up an entire field to itself, albeit to the rear, from where it was impossible to direct the fighting. Colonel Stepanov told me that his first regiment has been divided into small packets over a 10 kilometre front.

"And your reserves?"

⁸ In this regiment the officers could not understand the soldiers, who were 75% Cheremis [now more commonly known as the Mari, they speak a Finno-Ugric language].

⁹ Felt boots and shoes of lime bark. Standard peasant footwear for the time and place.



"I don't have any. I barely have enough of the regiment to guard 10 kilometres of a river that can be forded in most places."

Instead of massing the regiment in two or three manoeuvre groups, held in touch by a few mounted patrols, which would roam the riverbank, Stepanov had scattered his men into fifty small detachments, ready to be pushed by the first Red column that crossed the river.

I threw myself into the saddle to examine the situation, but I had scarcely gone five or six km when I encountered the first groups of fugitives: the Bisert had been crossed, the "black-reds" were in retreat again. Going back along the railway, passed Colonel Stepanov's train, and I warned him of this new defeat: he knew nothing about it, but I guessed he was expecting it.

A quarter of an hour later I returned to General Grivin:

"You have to decamp, *mon général!* The Reds might be here in a few hours."

He began to laugh:

"Ah, what the hell, have the *Udarniki* abandoned us again? I'm not surprised. But there is no immediate danger. My own troops will hold out for another day. What I fear at the moment is that the bastards have fled without first cutting the telephone wires. Let's go to the phone and tell them that the Bolsheviks are talking directly to Ekaterinburg."

On the way, General Grivin told me that he had received from General Gaida an order to return all the weapons that he had just taken from the Immortal Regiment to Colonel Stepanov. He replied with a request to rid him of the Shock Corps for good.

We had just entered the office of the Chief of Staff when the phone rang. The Colonel, Chief of Staff, answered it:

"Who is this?" Silence. The question was repeated.

"*Paruchik* N. of the 3rd Division HQ." (This officer did not exist.)

"Hello, what can I do for you?"

A lively conversation followed: questions about our numbers and our plans, was met by increasingly disjointed answers. General Grivin, who was giving the information, was holding his sides in laughter. After a few minutes, our correspondent, realising that he was being duped, burst out in curses and vigorous insults, which the colonel faithfully transmitted to his boss, but not without replying with no less peppery expressions. At last the outbursts calmed down. The questioner is none other than the Chief of Staff of the 26th Soviet Division, no doubt a formerly commissioned officer, who may or may not have been forced to serve the Red cause.

Our colonel remarked: "It's not going badly at your end!"

"Thank you, we are content."

"Now tell me, since we are having such a pleasant chat: what do you think about our *udarniki*?"

"Excellent troops, we like them a lot. It's always a real pleasure to attack them: they always bugger off! Don't forget then, the most important thing is to have them facing us next time!"

General Grivin, struggling with laughter, said to me: "You hear him, we are not the only ones to admire our freshly prepared *udarniki*. The enemy agrees with us!"

9. – A Benefit of Autocracy

Bisertskoe, 6 July 1919

Returning to my wagon, I saw a number of soldiers lying on the grass, snoring like crazy, their faces flushed. Others staggered through the forest, alongside young peasant girls, who have been lured away by the powerful rations of alcohol. These drunks form the general staff's (*okhrana*). Shooting can be heard clearly



from the front lines. The orgy lasted all night, and it is fortunate that the front did not let through a daring detachment, which would have slaughtered the entire staff.

The most important service which Tsar Nicholas II rendered to his people was the prohibition of the sale of vodka. It is no exaggeration to say that it takes no less than the power of a near-absolute autocracy for the people in a modern society to benefit from such a measure. Parliaments or governments, founded on party compromises, could not possibly rise to the excesses of the good. They obey the instincts of the parties on which they depend, or represent powerful interests, which they cannot rise above.

The scourge of alcoholism in Russia is such that it finds no comparison in any other country. Drunkenness here often takes terrible and sickly forms. Anyone who has seen, as I have during the revolution, the delirium and scandalous excesses of a mob which had seized a palace cellar, or of a regiment which had been able to get hold of a few barrels of brandy, will agree that Russian alcoholism is worse than a dangerous habit: it is a contagious and fatal plague.

In such countries, where custom and common morality do not fight against vices but which are considered innocent national weaknesses, one needs a government which can not only impose its will on the people, but which borrows its powers from its own prestige.

The sale of vodka was forbidden first for the period of mobilisation and then for the duration of the war, and was finally banned forever by an imperial decree of 28 September 1914. Thousands of letters to the Tsar, written in that familiar and touching tone that characterises the kind of patriarchal affection that almost the whole nation felt for the Emperor – I have had some of them in front of me – evoked in precise images the happiness that the ban brought to the country.

With the sale of vodka, its production also died out. The emperor was vigorously assisted by leaders who will be eternally remembered in the country. Brusilov, among others, had the vats and all the machinery for distilling alcohol destroyed within the entire radius of his armies. Some old officers sometimes complained loudly about this abstinence, which they claimed was unbearable, but they were not listened to: sobriety, like chastity, is a comforting evil.

It was only in July 1917 that I saw cases of mass drunkenness in the Russian army, and even that was drunkenness in the Austrian cellars of Galicia. Around the same time, the Russian newspapers reported horrible drunkenness in all the cities of Russia, followed by massacres. One could wonder whether these mobs, driven by theatrical and frenzied anger, roaming the wealthy districts, were driven only by the thirst for freedom.

The imperial decree against the consumption of alcoholic liquor, maintained and reinforced by the Bolshevik government¹⁰ – another autocracy – was abandoned by the Omsk government. In view of the enormous supplies of vodka amassed in Siberia, this government thought it necessary to permit the sale again, restricted only by the fixing of a maximum volume per head per month, and the absolute prohibition during the period of mobilisation. But the government could not ignore the fact that the spirit of Bolshevism had so taken hold of all classes of the population that no defence or restriction would do anything.¹¹ Sales officials, controllers, all

¹⁰ The sale and consumption of alcohol is punishable by death among the Reds. In Ufa I visited the house of a widow shot by order of the commissars for making "*samagonka*". The sobriety of the Bolshevik leaders – for the most part Israelites and light drinkers – is a recognised fact.

¹¹ I had a conversation on this subject in February 1919 with Minister S..., a witless man. I asked him:

"What motives did your government have for reintroducing the sale of vodka? Everyone knows what proportions the abuse of alcoholic drinks is assuming in your unfortunate country."

"There were several reasons for our attitude. Firstly, the shortage of money which the government is struggling with. Secondly, we are faced with the manufacture of vodka, *samagonka*, by the peasants for themselves. That drink is mixed with higher alcohols that are harmful to health, and the government thought it best to substitute a pure and less offensive alcohol."

"But why defend the manufacture and sale of alcohol at all? Why not punish, as the Reds do, the peasants guilty of clandestine manufacture? You know that Trotsky has made death a criminal offence."



gave in to the unlimited thirst of the country. During the periods of mobilisation, in Omsk and Novo-Nikolaievsk, it was possible to obtain any quantity of vodka in the open market, and almost the same from the "government wine shops".

So since the advent of the present regime, all the Siberian cities have witnessed scenes not seen since August 1914, and to which Bolshevism had disabused the country.

But above all at the front, alcohol took its toll. The government is guilty, not these men of often weak character, irritated by the life of the camps and the unfortunate fighting. I consider the lack of alcoholic beverages in the towns and villages that were taken after the Reds had introduced their draconian measures to be a significant reason for the Siberian army's success in March and April. In retreating, Kolchak's troops found "at home" immense provisions, more than enough to kill the last resources of energy, and accelerate the dreadful defeat.

10. – Scenes of the Retreat – Railway Accidents

Ekaterinburg, 13 July 1919

In this landscape without large rivers, and where hills and forests favour surprise attacks, the retreat of our troops, accustomed to it, became almost a constant. Everyone seemed to be infected with an unremitting weariness. There were no losses at the front. The enemy seemed to advance only because we retreat. Everyone consoled themselves that by withdrawing they remain intact, and that this several hundred kilometres of flight will one day be stopped, and that we would then go on the offensive. But we didn't foresee how or where, and we seemed to be waiting for an impulse from outside.

At the station of Bisertski-Zavod, where General Grivin stopped, I had my wagon hooked up to the first train of equipment which is moving in the direction of Ekaterinburg.

In all the stations, the approach of the front was felt. The railway workers had long been won over to the Reds, and maintained in an attitude favourable to the Soviet regime like the workers of some large factories, who were strongly organised and are preparing to join the Bolsheviks, but passive so giving the Cossacks no pretext for intervention.

The lesser railway officials, who would lose nothing with the change of regime, since the Bolsheviks knew how to distinguish those who would be able to serve their cause from among the "bourgeois", and have probably already been won over to the victorious army by huge bribes, slowed down their work and openly committed acts of sabotage.

Each station had its commander, generally a young officer who understood nothing of the complicated machinery of the tracks, switches and station depots, and who lacked the initiative of the Gaidas, Semenovs, Kalmykovs and other famous bandit leaders, accustomed to forcing obedience with a revolver in hand. Thus one invariably saw near each station a young officer busy signing orders for the transport of troops, equipment, and wounded, and in another building of the same station an official putting obstacles in the way at every opportunity, and constantly ordering complicated manoeuvres on all the tracks, so as to delay the departure and arrival of trains.

At the Druzhina station, where the two tracks from Krasnoufimsk and Berdyush to Ekaterinburg meet, I had my carriage hooked up to a train whose departure I had been promised. We did, in fact, get out of the station, but there we remained indefinitely, blocking the single departure track for the Corps trains. After four hours of waiting, I obtained information – first from the military authority, who merely signed a new dispatch order, then from the official of the day, who uttered disorganised sentences, full of topographical and technical

"That would be impossible. Calculate how many police we would need. The peasant will always make *samagonka* and so we will always drink alcohol in Siberia. And this is our main argument. By forbidding drink for citizens, they would be in flagrant contradiction with the law. We would be accustoming him to a state of mind that is fatal for a citizen: that of finding himself guilty and in violation of the law. It is better to allow what we cannot prevent."

"Your argument could not be more ingenious. De Liguori himself would not intercede with more leniency for the sinner. Since you cannot eliminate bribery and theft from your new society, will you allow them, allowing your preventive jurisprudence to inspire you?"



expressions, and finally from the second and third rank officials, who explained the enigma to me. Another train had approached from the direction of Ekaterinburg, unseen due to a bend in the track, and which entered after authorisation from the same stationmaster who let ours out, and had been almost touching us for four hours. Was it simply a question of delaying the trains of the Corps for the benefit of the Reds, or had a collision been prepared which would have permanently blocked a hundred or so trains. I entered the station master's office and said a few sentences full of threats and good sense. A quarter of an hour later, our train had been brought back to the station, the one opposite had returned, and ours had left for Ekaterinburg.

The city was in a state of turmoil. Long processions of carts heading towards the station and everywhere – on the quays and in the open air – encampments of bourgeois and peasant families awaiting their turn to leave. Everyone was plunged into stupefaction by this sudden evacuation, two months after the preparation of the next transfer of government offices to this city.

Everywhere dark forces stirred. Around the railway and other transport routes, workers' revolts broke out. There was a battle near the flour stores, which the railway workers refused to let go.¹² During the night I saw small groups at the station, whispering, and which dispersed at the sight of my uniform. I met sinister figures, sometimes half-drunk, with the lower staff: mechanics, drivers, signalmen, stowaways, conductors. Towards morning five people, including two well-dressed women, were arrested and convicted of sabotage, suffering the fate which the Bolsheviks intended for propagators of the opposite cause.

At 1 a.m., a collision occurred in the middle of the station which broke four baggage wagons and put two tracks out of order. At about 4 a.m. another collision took place, about six kilometres from us, and the only track between Ekaterinburg and Omsk was blocked for half a day. These were obviously not pure accidents.

This incessant sabotage was combined with systematic blackmail and both sides were being made to pay. General Diterikhs' staff prepared his departure, carefully hiding it from the French mission, but especially from the inhabitants, whom he deceived about the situation at the front to the point of abandoning them to the enemy without warning. But they suspected as much and all night long there is a back and forth among the mechanics to attach such and such wagon to such and such train, whose departure was predicted soon. But at the last moment, it would be another train which would leave, because a more powerful official had been paid off.

I spoke to General Jack about this, and he blamed me for proposing tougher measures against marshals, switchmen and engineers, who were wasting the army's valuable time. When it came to hooking up five cars of various foreign missions to the army headquarters train, he simply ordered the operation¹³ and did not seem surprised by the automatic execution of his wish. General Jack was unaware until that moment that he was indebted for this arrangement to a Russian manufacturer (but director of a factory with English capital, which assured him the protection of the English mission) whose *sluzhebny* wagon was placed between those of the Allied officers, and who in his own interest ensured the transport of the entire group of cars, paying 250 roubles to the yardman. The principle was saved: the officers had neither used force nor greased any palms of officials. General Jack expressed his satisfaction with this.

An interminable series of trains, following one another at 50 metre intervals, crawled towards Omsk. The public lived, in this sunny weather, for the greater part of the time outside the cars. As far as the eye can see, the trains follow one another. As soon as the most advanced one starts to move and the echo of the locomotives is heard a hundred times over, we jump into the cars. Four times we drive past the traces of recent collisions: locomotives buried in the sand, wagons reduced to rubble or burnt out, precursors of the new regime that the country is about to acclaim.

¹² Everywhere, large supplies of grain were abandoned to the enemy, and there was often reason to doubt that the people in charge – intendants, generals and transport chiefs – could use *force majeure*. In front of the bridge of Ufa, several trainloads of wheat, in Ufa 6 million poods of wheat and 4 million poods of oats were abandoned given to the exultant Reds, and sold to the Jewish merchants, who came from Siberia, to traffic in them in Russia. In Chelyabinsk, the intendants later inexplicably left behind up 4.5 million poods of wheat. [A pood is 16 kilograms or 36 pounds.]

¹³ The next morning General Jack complained that he had been reprimanded by the Russian staff, he, a specialist in railway transport, for having ordered the French-English wagons to be attached to the train!



At the town market where I go to buy supplies, the rural population showed a malicious joy at the sight of the fallen bourgeoisie, crammed into filthy cattle cars, fleeing from the prophets of the proletariat. But why did the peasant women throw such nasty and contemptuous words at us as we passed, at the very time when the sterile and cruel regime, whose departure they had celebrated in religious processions with great explosions of joy seven months ago, is approaching?

“We won’t give you any bread,” said a peasant woman, “we must leave something for the Reds.”

“Run,” said another, “run, but don’t stop before the sea, if you don’t want to be caught!”

“We don’t want your Omsk notes,” said an old peasant, “soon they won’t want them in Omsk, and soon after they won’t accept them in Irkutsk!”

For thirteen days we travelled between Ekaterinburg and Omsk, through the immense wheat fields of the Perm and Akmolinsk governments. This was the real purpose of the Red invasion. Doesn’t it remind one of the wars of conquest of the early Middle Ages? Warlike and nomadic tribes throwing themselves at gentler and more orderly civilisations, in order to enrich themselves with the products of systematic and continuous labour of which they themselves are incapable, only to return laden with the conquered treasures to their tents and mountains?

