

The War in Russia and Siberia

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CHAPTER V

PEASANT UPRISINGS

1. – Siberian Peasants

Barnaul, August 10, 1921¹

The Trans-Siberian Railway was, in some places, threatened by bands based in the villages surrounding the railway. Linking these bands with the Russian Bolsheviks would be a mistake. Although Red propaganda played a fairly considerable part in the formation of these partisan detachments, they could not be seen as vanguards of the Soviet army. The discontent that pushed so many peasants (20,000 in the southern region of Novo-Nikolaievsk alone) to take up arms against the troops of the Siberian government and their allies, the Czechs, Poles, Italians and Japanese, had complicated causes.

The age-old dream of the Russian peasant was not only the possession of the land that he and his ancestors had tilled, but also the autonomy of the small communes (*mirs*), that is, their exclusive and unlimited right to regulate their interests. The Bolshevik revolution had above all won the sympathies of the villages – in Siberia as in Russia – by its typical institution of local committees. These committees appointed officials, courts, staff of local militia, instituted new laws, and concluded alliances with other communes or groups of communes. These temporary alliances created the only form of a legal entity superior to the committee. But the decentralising tendency of the Russian commune, at first favoured by the Bolshevik propagators as the surest instrument of disorganisation of the old society or of what remained of it in the countryside, soon came into open conflict with the unifying principle of the “dictatorship of the proletariat”.

The proletariat could only survive and fight as a political party if it was disciplined and led by an iron hand. The Russian proletariat had a leader, and was represented by a thousand commissars who were going to carry to the whole country “the will of the proletariat”. After the short-lived illusion of independence, the peasants found themselves once again facing a centralised government and a new aristocracy, much more arrogant and less paternal than the old one. They felt betrayed and armed their supporters against the commissars, but the fury of their crude resistance was exhausted everywhere by the organised forces of the proletariat.

In Siberia, generally speaking, the peasants were still in the first stage of revolutionary illusions, acclaiming an autonomy which young idiots and students, continued to preach to them, and which no regime would ever grant them.

2. – Peasant Discontent – Ataman Annenkov

An attempt could have been made, by a meticulously fair and rigorous treatment, to bring the peasant to recognise his obligations – which he regarded as profoundly anti-democratic – to the nation. There was no lack of goodwill in the Omsk government. Its laws and decrees, its prescriptions to officials were, in general, inspired by humane principles. Unfortunately, the Omsk government was still only of symbolic value, and the real power of the Akmolinsk Ataman barely extended beyond Omsk district.

First of all there were the small grievances of the populace against the officials. The inhabitants of the village of Panfilovo, near Semipalatinsk, who were forced to clear the snow along the railway all winter at the rate of 7 roubles a day, never received a kopek.

Because of the poor communications between villages and county and government capitals, mobilisation or tax collection decrees arrived at the *starosts* considerably delayed, often after the deadline for registration of recruits or payment of taxes. Nevertheless, the villagers were forced to pay the fines.

¹ I presume this is an error, as it must be 1919.



Such peccadilloes did not, however, lead to the uprising of entire provinces. More serious discontent was caused by the conduct of the bands which, in the name of the Omsk government, “restored” order in these regions. The most famous detachments of looters were under the command of Ataman Annenkov.

Captain Annenkov, a fiery and brutal Cossack from the Semirechye, was a good detachment leader. He was refused subsidies at the beginning of the Siberian actions by the famous General Grichan-Almazov, Minister of War in Omsk. Subsidised instead by private individuals, he demanded the minister’s resignation and execution. He then fought beside the Czechs at the Urals front, where he distinguished himself with bloody repressions. The village of Slavgorod, where some twenty officers had been treacherously massacred by Reds, was drowned in blood. Refusing to obey the Czech command, imposed on the Russian troops by the Ufa Government, he left the front and went to his native Semipalatinsk, where he was greeted with no joy.

Annenkov settled in Semipalatinsk, guided – it is said – by English officers. He assembled nothing less than a national army: Cossacks, Great Russians,² Ukrainians, Magyars, Bashkirs, Prussians, Mongols, Tatars, Chinese, every one was there. Wearing skulls as insignia, these warriors inscribed on their wagons: “God and the Ataman”, or: “We fear only our Ataman”. No justice was recognised except that of Annenkov, and the civilians in the region could only overcome the violence with which they were constantly threatened by flattering his ambitions.

While defending the Semirechensk front against the not particularly dangerous Red bands, these troops entered villages, under the slightest pretext, to steal and set fire to them. Annenkov requisitioned everything: bank safes, effects of the Russian and Allied commissariats, houses, jewellery, raw materials. The following anecdote proves the independence of the ataman from the government. Annenkov had the Volga-Kama Bank building occupied. The director sent a reasoned complaint to the admiral and went to talk to the ataman. The latter, favourably impressed by this approach, gave in: he only confiscated the workers’ health insurance fund. The next day, when the director returned to his office, he found the building empty: everything, including the tables and chairs, had been removed. Stunned and desperate, he went to complain to Annenkov: the latter brandished an untimely dispatch from the admiral, forbidding him to touch the bank. “You have only to complain to the admiral,” he said.

After the systematic looting of the city and the region, Annenkov became more amenable: funds were running out. The Allies offered mediation. In order to realise the fiction of a command unit in Siberia, all that remained was to recognise Annenkov and his band and incorporate them, as they were, into the Siberian army. Unfortunately, the Omsk government was still too weak to exercise sufficient control and made itself somewhat responsible for the conduct of these regional bands, without deriving from them much advantage for the national cause when it was in danger. ³ The peasants, to oppose the brigandage of the *Annenkovtsi*, put themselves in a state of open rebellion against the Siberian government, which was henceforth obliged to organise campaigns by its regular and Allied troops in order to re-establish its prestige and get the culprits out of trouble.

When alongside the *Annenkovtsi*, the government troops and detachments acted in the same way.

The Czech, Major Beil found the Krasilnikov detachment busy looting the inhabitants of the village of Talaia, south of Kamentchaga, during an operation in May 1919 against a “Red” band from Krasnoyarsk. Coats, samovars, watches and jewellery had been loaded onto the detachment’s carts. To Beil’s objections, the head

² As opposed to Little Russians, or Ukrainians.

³ When on July 1919, Annenkov’s detachment was sent to the front in Ekaterinburg to restore the situation, it refused to fight. It was happy just to chase the Jews out of the public garden, to loot certain districts, to massacre the Jews on 12 July, and to flee three days before the arrival of the Reds. To apologise for the pogrom, the head of the detachment sent the following report: “On 11 and 12 July, the scouts of my detachment were able to confirm that the Jews in Ekaterinburg were buying 20 and 40 rouble Kerensky notes *en masse* and that they were preparing to receive the Red Army in triumph. Finding this manoeuvre anti-governmental, I ordered my detachment, responsible for the defence of the city, to put an end to it, with arms, if necessary. The soldiers, faithful servants of the fatherland, could not bear such a great offence on the part of the Jews, and decided, without being authorised to do so by their leaders, to massacre the Jews, which took place. Taking into account the exceptionally brave conduct of the soldiers (!), I wish to intervene on their behalf so that they are not punished.”



of the detachment replied: "This is Kolchak's orders!" Some Cossacks, moved by the women's cries of despair, offered to put an end to the scandal: "Czech brothers, if you want to act, we will act together with you!" Beil could only defend the Russians from looting for the four hours he was in the village.

Lieutenant Vasiliev of the 42nd Siberian Regiment, the examining magistrate, Fried, and the head of the local militia of Volchikha, acted in collusion to beat the peasants, "requisition" money, rape the women, etc.

A final grievance was directed against the Czechs, whom the population accused of impoverishing the country by buying up livestock, grain and raw materials.⁴

3. – Bolshevik Propaganda in the Villages

The Siberian peasants, and especially those who lived in the region I had just visited (between Novo-Nikolaievsk⁵ and the Altai) were by no means Bolsheviks. Descendants of intrepid settlers or convicts, they are a race jealous of their independence and opposed to all constraints. They could not put up with the tyranny of the Reds for a single day, and would moreover lose out under that regime – being all landowners, and often large landowners. But because of the superficial penetration of Bolshevism, which had just entered its final phase a year ago, the Bolshevik danger remained almost unknown to them. Many of the villages which maintained forces opposing the Admiral's government had spontaneously driven out the Reds at the very moment when the Czechs swept the Trans-Siberian. These "rebellions" did not, therefore, mean adherence to the Moscow regime. It is certain that when it penetrates to this point it too will have to reckon with similar movements.

However, the "revolutionary" organisations in the villages were concentrated around activists and agitators from Russia. The Omsk Government had failed to sufficiently control the thousands of prisoners of war who at the beginning of the year returned from Germany to Siberia. During the advance of the Admiral's troops the Reds had, with remarkable generosity, allowed them to pass through their lines. In March near Ufa I interviewed some former prisoners of war who confessed that many of their comrades had never been to Germany. There had crept in among them a large number of Bolshevik agents, amply supplied with money and instructions, and whose activity in Siberia was easy to follow.

In every group of Red partisans operating in this region there is at least one imported leader, more intelligent and more daring than the natives. At Bisk, a group of 30 peasants were led past my wagon, having been surprised by the Czechs in a forest, where they had hidden in preparation for an attack on our train. It was difficult for me to see them taken prisoner without feeling a certain satisfaction. The next night was stormy. The station was never guarded. We would have all passed through, had they not been discovered, and I fear that they would all have paid with their lives for the planned attack. Among these people, unarmed and fierce, it was easy for me to distinguish the leader: so close to death, he still seemed to retain an ascendancy over his people.

The approach of the Soviet armies increased the prestige of the agents whom the peasants had initially accepted with distrust. Wishing to take revenge on the *Annenkovtsi*, the civil servants, etc., the rebellious peasants put themselves more and more under the tutelage of the "commissars", without wishing in the least to commit their future. The propaganda of these prophets, mostly young and ardent and for the most part students driven out of the cities, was limited to the ideas which had made the first revolution popular: abolition of large properties, autonomy of the communes, extension of the rights of the *zemstvos*, creation of village committees, abolition of class privileges, etc.

Everywhere there were Red "staffs" whose activity radiated in all directions. Officers of the 5th Czech regiment found posted in the church in Chilova village the following warning: "One of these days a strong band of

⁴ Due to the monetary confusion reigning in this country, with the circulation of some thirty different kinds of bank and credit notes, and innumerable counterfeit notes, the population had reverted to the primitive method of trade by exchange of goods. The rouble is rejected as a form of payment, but is retained as a basis for calculating prices. Thus the Kyrgyz sold: cows at 1,500 roubles, butter at 300 roubles a pound; oats at 30, wheat at 22 roubles a pound. They exchanged these articles for: tea at 30 roubles per pound, ropes for cars at 25 roubles per aune (1.2 metres), iron sheets and nails at 120-150 roubles a pound; felt at 60 roubles per square aune.

⁵ Now Novosibirsk.



brigands disguised as soldiers (an allusion to the Czech company guarding the railway) will come and try to loot and burn your houses and take away your livestock. Let everyone arm themselves and drive out the usurpers! (Signed:) Red HQ, Izima.”

4. – Composition of the Rebel Groups

The number of armed “Bolsheviks” between Novonikolaievsk and Barnaul may be estimated at 5,000, between Barnaul and Semipalatinsk at 4 to 5,000, and around Bisk at 12,000. Besides this there was a population in turmoil in every place, from which multiple groups would emerge as soon as circumstances were favourable.

Two months previously, there was in this region a nucleus ready for the future insurrection. Hiding in the *taiga* (forests impenetrable either by water or by thick brush) were convicts freed by the Soviets, former Red soldiers driven into the forests by the victorious Czechs and day labourers with nothing to lose and won over by Red propaganda. From there they made incursions into the wealthy villages. Red agents were able to join these brigands with the peasants revolting against Annenkov and the Czechs, or in outright rebellion against the Ufa government.

First the inhabitants were forced to house and feed them, and every sign of discontent was used to mobilise by force or persuasion new villages in the name of revolution – a vague and irresistible word! For a while now, even rich peasants (people with stores of 10,000 and 20,000 poods of wheat) have been joining the bands.

The most valuable acquisitions are the furloughed soldiers, coming from the front with rifle, sabre and cartridges (!). Many of them, having exceeded the term of their leave, do not dare to return to the regiment and let themselves be won over along with their weapons. Then there are the deserters. Small patrols generally pass to the enemy. Six weeks ago, the guard post at the bridge over the Ob, near Barnaul, deserted, with weapons and several boxes of cartridges.⁶ There is an ongoing trade for army ammunition. Two soldiers, who left the Ural front on leave are reported to have stolen and transported, along the Trans-Siberian Railway, two machine-guns with ammunition.

The armament of the partisans consisted of 10-20% rifles, mainly Berdans and hunting rifles. The others have only scythes and pikes: bars made sharp by the village blacksmith and attached to long poles, like the Cossacks. They always attack in large numbers and on horseback with remarkable courage, even against machine-gun fire, sometimes reaching the first lines of the enemy. The Czechs at Topchikha station came to hand to hand combat with the besieging peasants. Against such united and disciplined troops the peasant losses were appalling. Sometimes there were 78 dead partisans against 2 wounded Czechs (at Topchikha), or 256 dead against a few wounded (near Ust-Talmenka).

You could often see them coming from afar, large numbers across the horizon. They were rough, stocky, ferocious and coarse, most of them sitting on the bare back of a horse, spear in hand, watching the stations for days. They made the sign of the cross when charging, as if against a legendary enemy. If they withdrew before a resolute attitude of the adversary, they came back from another direction. The infantry, isolated over immense distances, was powerless against them. They had to be on guard day and night, which made surveillance of the railway extremely tiring. The Poles and Czechs found the mutilated corpses of their comrades, whom these partisans had surprised. Before they died, these poor exiles plunged into this civil war to which they were so completely foreign, had undergone countless tortures: deep holes burnt into the flesh with red-hot iron, limbs cut off in small fragments, skulls removed, eyes sunken in, skin torn off, and a hundred other inventions in which one recognises the imagination of the murderers who had escaped from the great Siberian prisons.

5. – Repressions by Czechs and Russians.

The Russians could not guard the railway. The current day Russian regiment shows tolerable military qualities only near the front, in combat formations. Large-scale warfare separates the combatants and makes propaganda among the enemy difficult.

⁶ The official Russian report says that the bridge post had been surprised by the Reds and taken prisoner. Investigation by Czech and Russian officers established the facts as I have mentioned above.



However, militia corps and small garrisons in provincial towns could not be isolated from the contagion. The partisans, who were in no way different from the other peasants, mingled with the public at the railway stations, with the groups of merchants and shoppers going to and from the markets. They talked to you, then as soon as you turned around, shot you in the back. At Barnaul I saw a Russian rider kill, with a single blow of his sabre, a common man who was making propaganda among his comrades. But on another occasion, the agent did better, and whole units disappeared to go and reinforce the partisans.

The officers commanding small isolated detachments, fearing the lack of conviction or betrayal by the men, dared not act. There was always for the troops, in an hour of danger, the option of saving their skins by sacrificing their leader. There were cases where a young officer suddenly seized with fear abandoned his soldiers, rightly or wrongly, and returned to barracks alone. Russian garrisons operated only in large groups, heavily armed, manoeuvring slowly and cautiously, attacking an enemy who was always warned and had time to escape to a distant region.

The uncertainty that hung over the attitude of the troops weighed on the authorities, living in their towns under the incessant threat of an insurrection. All of them played down the enemy, hoping to soften him up. A partisan peasant, taken prisoner by the Czechs near Kalmanka, declared that his group – which they had “never managed to surprise” – received its information from *Praporshchik* N... and from Barnaul’s militia leader. In conversations with citizens I often came across the following sentence: “We are neutral, we are waiting for the outcome of the civil war and will not take sides,” A government that is fighting for its existence is powerless in the face of such weaknesses and hesitations. Only the prestige of force could dispel them.

The rebellion of the Krasnoyarsk garrison, cooperating with Magyar prisoners, which could only be put down by the Czechs and Cossacks, demonstrated that guarding of the Trans-Siberian Railway could only be entrusted to foreigners. Czech, Polish, Italian, Japanese and American troops stationed along the railway line were not only closed to Red propaganda by their disciplinary cohesion and their national spirit – the Reds have, moreover, taken it upon themselves to make them all furious by committing atrocities – but by their very presence support the morale of the Russian garrisons.

Small foreign detachments, often led in a superior manner, were sufficient to repress disorder and punish the perpetrators. But they could not prevent the activities of the “*podryvnia otriady*”, the groups exclusively working on the systematic destruction of the railway. The Novonikolaievsk to Barnaul track and its two branches towards Bisk and Semipalatinsk, 750 km long, were guarded only by a Czech cavalry regiment, an infantry battalion and a battery.

At the stations, destruction was caused by false manoeuvres with the switches, by unhooking the lubrication boxes and by damaging the brakes. In many places, during the night, the rails were bent, detached at one end, by teams of 8 horses which were driven along the line; the line became unusable and time was lost in bringing in new rails. Wooden bridges, innumerable in this country of small dry ravines, were burnt. Bands of a few thousand partisans isolated troop transports or armoured trains in the middle of the forests, setting fire to the neighbouring bridges, in order to finish off the occupants more easily.

Only the cavalry could pursue the partisans. The Czech cavalry, even in small packs, had a good game with them. Since we could not slow down the advances, which only extreme speed could make victorious, we were obliged not to transport prisoners. Moreover, we had comrades to avenge, whose bloody remains we sometimes collected with shovels.

So all the posters that the “Red HQs” spread in the villages, wanting the fall of the Siberian government, and the proclamation of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, put a bounty on the heads of the regional counter-revolutionaries: Cossack chiefs, and also those ferocious democrats, the Czechs.

6. – An Outpost in the Night

Barnaul, 13 August 1919

The Czech battalion (of the 5th regiment) stationed in Barnaul, under the excellent Captain Costiaak, was distributed as follows: two companies stood guard at the large bridge over the Ob, at the port and in the town. Another company was ready to intervene a little further north, near the Ust-Talmenka station, where newly



formed detachments had just interrupted the railway services. The fourth company occupied an advanced post at the Kalmanka station, which I sought to visit.

Although the streets were filled with Russian soldiers, who could be heard singing at all times during their frequent marches, the Czechs kept watch over the area around the railway, as if they alone were defending order in this seriously undermined society. Numerous Russian detachments with machine guns and cannons and whole regiments in shining costumes of regular cavalry or Cossacks are seen leaving, but all this military movement is only for show. They operated with too much circumspection, and even if there was no connivance with the enemy there they were slow and lacked decisiveness: the enemy had always left. Between Barnaul and Semipalatinsk, as between Barnaul and Bisk, only the Czech columns counted.

The battalion's armoured train was in Kalmanka. We went to the front in a transport that offered far less guarantee of safety. Behind the locomotive, where a Czech soldier with bayonet on his rifle watched over the mechanic and the driver, there were a dozen platforms loaded with sandbags and carrying Chinese coolies who, in this unfortunate country, are increasingly replacing the Russian worker. Finally there was a luggage wagon, where there was Captain Costiaak, three soldiers armed with rifles and grenades, and myself.

Between a thousand low hills, a distant continuation of the Altai Mountains, the outlook changed constantly. Bad, poorly cultivated fields alternated with wide strips of forest that cross the country and which the marshes or bushy scrub make almost impenetrable. Walking through the shade of tall trees in such a region, created for the war of surprises, felt uncomfortable.

We entered the area of recent fighting. Five new bridges were surrounded by twisted rails and half-burnt beams. The first three were the responsibility of the nearest village, which the Czechs had warned: "If one of the bridges burns down, we'll burn your whole village!" Unarmed peasants stood guard there, ready to give an alarm signal to the soldier posts guarding the two more distant bridges.

Huffing and puffing, stopping at each rise to catch our breath, our train crawled gently through this unfruitful region and which did not seem to justify the construction of such a long track. But it led, several hundred km further on, to the rich region of Semipalatinsk. There the pioneers of the great Slavic nation, the Cossacks from Semirechye or Siberia, settlers, merchants or Russian military leaders had for centuries reached out to or clashed with the Muslim and Buddhist peoples of Asia: Bashkirs, Tatars, Mongols and Kirghiz.

In Kalmanka, we entered a military camp, protected by sentry posts and patrols. A company of Russians, camped in the vicinity of the station, only owed its value to the proximity of a Czech company – united, alert, ferocious and formidable. Attached to the Czech wagons – to which these warriors were stuck like snails to their shells – were numerous Bolshevik lances as trophies, crowned with flowers and white-red flags. In the streets the Slavic brothers of the Russian soldiers walk about very correctly and self-confidently, but have a rigid discipline and are united as a brotherhood developed by age-old struggles with the Germanic races.

A week ago this Czech company was the subject of a full-scale siege at Topchikha station, which it was forced to abandon. It lived there on the same train, and was suddenly isolated 120 km from its nearest neighbouring companies by the destruction of the telegraph wires and by attempts to set fire to the many wooden bridges. A band of two or three thousand mounted partisans tried to outflank, by force of numbers, the small troop of 107 Czechs, barricaded between their troop and baggage trains. Most of the peasants were armed only with pikes, but they attacked with vigour. They used all the tricks to which we had become accustomed by the stories of Mayne-Reid and Aimard:⁷ attacks hidden behind rows of oxen, crawling through wheat and tall grass, followed by sudden screaming rushes, etc. The night was agitated and terrible. Several partisans managed to get to the trains and were knocked out with rifle butts. An officer and a few men who had left in a locomotive with the two machine guns of the company, returned towards dawn, after a harrowing crossing of the bridges seriously damaged by fire. The insurgents were driven back with the aid of those machine guns, whose effect on the simple is always incalculable, leaving a circle widened but unbroken. The cries of the partisans and the moaning of wounded animals rang out on all sides. The Czechs set off, repaired some bridges, and arrived at Chilova station. Here the same scene began again. Partisans, who had come from everywhere,

⁷ Adventure writers of the 19th Century, along the lines of Jules Verne.



closed the cordon. The destruction of several bridges stopped a return trip. The Czechs prepared to fight their way through thousands of fanatics with their weapons in hand. At that moment, a half-squadron under *Poruchik* Saibert fell like a thunderstorm on Chilova, slashed about twenty peasants who had thrown their arms in the air, and chased the others away in panic. The besieged and liberators embraced warmly. The infantrymen swore to bury for ever the old feelings of hatred and their ugly words against the cavalry.

Captain Costiaak and I continued our journey in the battalion's armoured train. We were to visit the half-squadron stationed in front of Chilova, the vanguard of the railway protection units.

We had only just stopped, in the middle of the countryside, when the *Poruchik* Saibert came to meet us. Saibert was young and slender, with a bony and energetic face, breathing of battle. A magnificent musketeer, loving war as an art and a sport, he has made his 50 horsemen into a splendid and feared detachment – more than the “little father” Masaryk ever hoped for his spiritual sons. He gave us a summary of his monotonous life, where only the expectation of some warlike adventure sustained the soul during the hours and days of unbearable boredom.

The detachment had set up in a small fortified camp, surrounded by a ditch. Fifty horsemen and the crew of two 87-millimetre rapid-fire guns and four machine guns brought the tiny garrison to 90 men. We slept in two small peasant huts, and then under the stars.

Light clouds floated in the dark sky. Our eyes, finally accustomed to the night, thought they could see shadows floating all around us. A reconnaissance of three riders galloped out and disappeared into the darkness.

“Our situation is a bit ridiculous. We are surrounded, night and day, by a few thousand partisans watching us from afar, being relieved if they are tired. They are eager for revenge waiting for a short moment of inattention to fall on our backs. So we only see them more than a little way off as small profiles on the horizon, coming closer at night, guarding against imaginary dangers an undefined region which they could not defend if we wanted to take it – we never attack unless forced to. My patrols go out and come back all day and night. This afternoon, seven horsemen went out with a machine gun for a ride in the vicinity and were soon surrounded by three hundred mounted partisans. They continued their ride without firing a shot but were always followed, at a respectable distance, by this dangerous escort.”

“Collaboration with the Russians? I refuse it absolutely. The shaky state of their troops makes it impossible to count on them. A Russian company, or even a regiment, placed under my command, would compromise the safety of my men and the success of my plans. With them there is no determination, no spirit, and none of the rapidity which explain our successes and our small losses.”

7. – A Russian Officer Leading Mongols

Bisk, 16 August 1919

Bisk is situated on the river Bia, which merges with the river Katun and forms the Obi just past the town. The district capital and Russian outpost to one of the wildest parts of Mongolia, Bisk is situated on an important route, which leads to China through the passes of the Altai Mountains. The market is large; hunters and miners from the Altai meet there, along with traders and buyers of twenty different races. They meet in front of the big church on market days. Kirgiz, Kalmyks, Bashkirs, Tatars and Mongols in long fur coats, under fur caps and hats in bright colours, meet with Russian, Japanese, Chinese and Korean merchants.

The day after my arrival, partisans derailed a train near Khayruzovka and so stopped all transport for four days. I took advantage of this forced stay to introduce myself to a few prominent people. Apart from the Czechs, the only one I met who was capable of conviction and action was Captain Von Meer.

Captain Von Meer, after having fought well during the Japanese war,⁸ was kept from the front during the Great War because of his Baltic origin. The distrust of the Great Russians towards Estonian officers was often ill-

⁸ On 14 June 1904, he was sent on a reconnaissance mission with eighteen mounted Cossacks in the Sin-You-Tsen region. At the turn of a valley, he met a Japanese lieutenant on foot, accompanied by two soldiers. Asked to surrender, they refused and took up a fighting stance. Unwilling to charge, *Rotmistr* Von Meer proposed a duel by swords, which the Japanese accepted. The men were ordered not to intervene, whatever happened. Disarmed by his gigantic opponent, the



founded. Russian mothers and grandmothers contribute to character as well as the family name. Von Meer was relegated to the district of Bisk, near the Altai, and put in charge of a sotnia of Transbaikal Cossacks – whose broad yellow stripes he wore.

He was tall, a hardy rider and loved adventure. In 1915 he arrested a German officer in the mountains, who had come from Peking, probably with sinister intentions. Charged with pursuing and punishing Mongols – Russian subjects who had refused to serve at the front and cattle thieves – he crossed the Altai into Mongolia with 75 Cossacks, punished the culprits and defeated the detachments of Mongols who opposed his entry into Chinese territory. He came into contact with some Mongolian chieftains and managed to attach them to his person, as only a Russian can do, and even then only a Russian officer. Three Mongolian khans, Klan-gun, Tsuker-bay and Kubay-gun, commanding tribes of ten thousand swordsmen, grew fond of him. They loved his powerful stature, his frank and rough speech, his resistance to bad weather, fatigue and drink, his practical intelligence mixed with cunning, his efforts to understand other races, his vigilant diplomacy: never being fooled, not being obstinate in hatred, knowing how to forgive. By submitting to him, as to a demigod, they knew they were appreciated, and if they asked to be led, they are certain not to be despised. These Mongols adored the Russian in him.

Von Meer dreamt of Russian supremacy over the Mongolian, Kirghiz and Kalmyk peoples: all nomads and excellent horsemen. They live among their herds in tents, and are brave, prone to looting, dangerous, but disciplinable by chiefs who would know how to impose themselves. He dreamt of not abandoning the incalculable wealth of the Altai to the Reds or to foreigners: gold, silver, platinum and coal mines, rare furs, immense herds, the living force of the rapid currents and waterfalls.

Two American engineers who had come to study a plan to exploit the “blue coal” of the Katun River, were suddenly arrested by Kirgiz, roughed up a bit and released.

Von Meer trembled with anger at the thought of the Soviets approaching or entering China. He believed he could use a force of Mongolian horsemen against a military movement from the south, joining the right wing of the Siberian Cossacks. He worked hard to organise these brave and merciless hordes. The defiles of the Altai can be easily defended at Charatskaia, Solonernaia, Kuagan, and Komar, which a few machine guns will be enough to guard.

And if – which seemed unlikely to him – the Soviet armies succeed in gaining a foothold as far as Bisk, with the help of the rebellious peasants, he would launch a new Mongol invasion as far as the Trans-Siberian. It would be terrible, but he would prefer a victory of these warlike peoples to that of the cold theorists who had destroyed his homeland. While waiting for the restoration of the Romanovs, he would reign, delegated by the power of the ataman Semenov, over an empire situated in both worlds, and which he would keep intact for a future Russian domination.

8. – Suspension of Hostilities

Barnaul, 18 August.

Many partisans withdrew to their villages. The ears of corn were full, the fields bore abundant crops. The partisans left their spears and their Berdan rifles, and went to harvest more peaceful crops. A resumption of the civil war was not to be expected for another six or seven weeks.

little Japanese refused to surrender. During the second phase of the fight he managed to wound his opponent in the neck (the famous straight blow to the throat). Von Meer considered this blow to be treacherous – and he was wrong – and smashed his head. He then dismissed the two soldiers with the corpse of their leader, and returned to have his bleeding wound dressed. The next morning he was visited by a Japanese MP, whom General Kuroki had sent to inquire about the name of the Russian officer who had behaved so admirably. Similar incidents, reminiscent of the wars of ancient chivalry, had been frequent enough.

