

The War in Russia and Siberia

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CHAPTER IX

ATAMAN SEMENOV

1. – The man

The events of the last two years have brought the curious figure of Ataman Semenov into sharp relief. He has long since lost the favour of the Allies. He has kept the jealousies of his Siberian competitors. His former comrades-in-arms in Harbin, as well as his new colleagues in Vladivostok, also envy him for his military and financial successes.

At the beginning of 1918, this cavalry captain had a unique chance to reconquer his unfortunate homeland, to give it back to its abused people, and perhaps to lead it towards a happier destiny. He lacked nothing in this desirable mission: not the admiration of the waiting crowds, nor the encouragements and the help of interested governments. But the destinies of men are written in heaven. His boldness, which kept all eyes on him, was perhaps his only great quality. The valiant squadron leader, who became field ataman of the Transbaikal, Amur and Ussuri Cossacks, was like a pawn that wise forces pushed all the way across a chessboard towards the powerful dignity of the Queen.

The ataman was of average stature and solidly built. Under a good forehead, he had small eyes, sometimes fixed, sometimes shy. He spoke without gestures, choosing his words well, which made the same impression as the man did overall: simplicity and good sense. I had the pleasure of talking with him several times: in his train, in his little house in Chita and in an excursion with him into the hills of Transbaikal. It was as impossible for me to escape the affection he inspires in everyone, as it was for me not to pity him and Siberia, for not having resisted his entourage better and not having allowed himself to be inspired by healthier principles of government. So he seemed to me less happy than he had been at the glorious beginning of his campaign against the "enemies of Russia and of the human race", when his bravery inspired his detachment. He had a raw energy, a young Samson whose hair had been cut off, except for a single Napoleonic curl, which was lovingly arranged on his forehead every morning.¹

2. – His Work

Semenov is a Cossack from Transbaikal, born in a stanitsa near Nerchinsk. He went to war in 1914, with the rank of *khurunji*, and distinguished himself on the German front by an action that earned him the St. George's Cross. His regiment, surprised by a strong detachment of uhlans, had lost its flag. Semenov succeeded in taking it back from them, reattacking with an inferior force.

Sent by Kerensky to the Far East to organize a regiment of Mongolian-Buryats (a tribe occupying several villages in the Transbaikal), he was stopped in Siberia by the second revolution, and then by the peace talks in Brest-Litovsk. At the end of 1917 he lived with eleven comrades in a small hotel in the border town of Manchuria Station. The Russian soldiers had broken free from discipline, and Bolshevik commissars were pushing them into action. After having had their fill of the joy of being free, they were going to prepare themselves for the other joy of being masters. Every night, the twelve officers barricaded themselves in an old abandoned Chinese barracks, so as not to be surprised by the garrison.

One evening in January 1918, the 200 soldiers occupying the Manchuria station were assembled in their barracks for a "political meeting". The handful of officers under Semenov's command surrounded the building. Lieutenant Urbanovich entered, a grenade in each hand:

¹ His entourage called him: "the Russian Napoleon." They published his likeness with the famous curl hanging on his forehead. [This was very much a Cossack hairstyle, common to the Asian nomads.]



"Hands up! You are surrounded. Any resistance is useless. Surrender your weapons, or I will tear you to pieces!"

The soldiers raised their arms in the air, an officer went around the room and disarmed the assembly. Captain Semenov then made a theatrical entrance, chased the committee out of the gallery which he climbed up. With one hand he held a revolver and with the other a grenade over the panicking soldiers:

"I could have you all shot. Thank God that I have resolved to content myself with a speech. You idiots, etc., etc."

The soldiers, calmed and grateful, applauded furiously. Semenov had the soldiers locked up in six baggage cars and sent them to Siberia the same evening. He kept the weapons and ammunition and made an offer to General Horvath to fight against the Reds. Unfortunately, he had Harbin's officers opposed to him.

They refused to follow a Cossack captain, despite many being intelligent and brave officers. The generals in Harbin – Pereverzev, Plechkov, Samoilov – were not the leaders that the circumstances required. Numerous detachments were created, but they lacked spirit. The officers got used to idleness in that Chinese city, where the Bolsheviks would not come to them, for fear of the Chinese. Slowly they slipped into administrative functions, and went into banking and trade.

General Samoilov characterized Semenov as: "A bad officer, a bad comrade, almost driven out of the regiment!" Harbin's handsome officers note that "Semenov, not being a commissioned officer, does not know how to conduct combat." And then, "there is no need to fight, since the Reds do not attack, and attacking without necessity is a mistake!" But in early 1918, among the thousands of officers dazed by misfortune, this "bad officer", this "mediocre strategist" was the only one to act. In order to judge this brave captain, who was to become such a lamentable administrator, it is necessary to remember that the moderates were downtrodden. The "bourgeoisie" showed such cowardice and betrayed its convictions with such inconsistency, that Semenov's single attack was worth more than ten conferences of diplomats in order to straighten out their behaviour.

Abandoned and thwarted by his comrades, Semenov remained determined to take action, and began his work of liberation almost exclusively with foreigners. He entered the campaign with 170 Russians (artillerymen), 700 Mongolian-Buryats, 300 Serbs and 400 Japanese volunteers.

At the beginning there was some cooperation with the Harbin detachments through General Horvath. When Colonel Vrakhtel, with his 260 cavalymen and three field pieces, came to the rescue of the *Semenovtsi* in the middle of a fight, they smiled at this dirty little band of lieutenants who had to draw their rank insignia onto their rags with an oil pencil. Well-fed and equipped, they flaunted their broad general's stripes (*lampas*) in front of these thin and hungry riflemen. After ten days of campaigning, they left their post without authorisation to go and rest in Harbin, where they stayed.² Among all the detachment commanders – Rakhilski, Vrakhtel, Orlov, Potapov, Dumanievski – Semenov was the only real leader. He and his people; young, poor, patriotic and brave, risked everything, having nothing to lose but honour. It was their time of greatness. The success of Semenov had not yet attracted the band of intriguers and thieves who would court the "great ataman", the "second Napoleon", "one of the greatest men history has ever known". It was only later, when the *Semenovtsi* felt safe behind the Allied cordon (Czech-Japanese) that they went to war to enrich themselves.

Harbin's generals and colonels should have rushed to be under the command of the warrior and man of action – a rarer phenomenon than a commissioned officer – that Semenov was. By sulking against him, they abandoned him to an entourage of young adventurers, who lost him to a policy of violence and greed.

3. – His Entourage

Bushido, that admirable code of military honour, is severely contemptuous of any search for gain by a warrior. The military man occupies the highest step, the merchant the lowest step of the social ladder, as it should be.

² The other detachments behaved similarly.



It is right that the warrior who so often possesses through his weapons the means to enrich himself, should learn to turn away from it with disdain.³ The alliance with honour must be a marriage without dowry.

Semenov allowed his officers a less disinterested conduct. I once spoke to him, during an errand in the vicinity of Chita, about the brigandage (requisitions) for which they were blamed. He gave me a disturbing answer: "Moral conceptions change in the history of a country, like the seasons!" I replied with the hope that we would return to the old ideas.

Some 655 rail shipments, weighing 8,000 tons, were taken by the *Semenovtsi* in November 1918 and sold. These sales were carried out through a "symbiosis" with the merchants of Chita and Harbin. The old disdain of the officer for the merchant class had – unfortunately – disappeared with the old regime. They worked together. The relations between Mars and Mercury was close and profitable. Every wagon requisitioned in Chita or Manchuria was immediately paid for and emptied by the merchants, who thus spared the officer the dishonour – one sees such things only in Harbin – of becoming a shopkeeper.

Even the "Semenov stores", created to help the poor, were used for clever and subtle procedures reminiscent of high finance. They were to sell the necessities of life to the poor population. But the ataman's manager sold them only to those with good Tsarist bills, which were available only to bankers and their accomplices. Thus it was impossible for the poor to get flour from the charity stores. The merchants sold it to them in other stores at a higher price that were brazenly set up next door. Officers and merchants shared the profit of these transactions.

In the provinces, requisitions were part of the occupation system. They were carried out at the expense of the Cossacks which made them enemies of the regime.

In another chapter,⁴ the reader will find details of the atrocities committed by some of Semenov's officers. They were the – clumsy – continuation of the procedures to which Semenov had to resort at the beginning of his regency. Exercising a power that was not yet well established over a population of fiercely independent colonists who were agitated by enterprising conspirators, he was often forced to strike hard and fast. At such a time, the Gospel would act like a deadly poison, and cruelty could be defended. But, "a well applied cruelty is that which one should apply only once for one's own safety, and then as much as possible, for the good of one's subjects."⁵ There was no system of government behind Semenov's actions. No serious desire for pacification and appeasement. The war was not halted. Semenov used Russian officers, natives of cities situated thousands of miles from the Transbaikal, who were strangers to the country and to the populace, and who were ready if things turned out badly, to leave and enjoy the money which they had long ago amassed abroad in Chinese banks.

Semenov did not want the interminable scandals, which he partially ignored and partially pretended not to believe, and besides which all the investigations were brazen enough to deny, but he let them happen. If he was pushed vigorously enough, he punished some culprits. But such late measures were badly understood and badly taken by the officers, who were accustomed to absolute freedom and who could become threatening.⁶

³ To reward a victorious general with a gift of money is a merchant's idea. The consideration of a great victory as a well-conducted commercial business, the raising of a pleased businessman into a nobility of military origin are of the same sort of idea.

⁴ "With the Japanese Troops in Siberia".

⁵ Machiavelli.

⁶ After the execution of some officers, on the Ataman's orders, a colonel told me that Semenov should be careful. There were other leaders than him, for example Baron von Ungern-Sternberg, who were superior in decision making and giving orders. I answered, however, that this new one would be only a master, whereas the famous Cossack of Transbaikal was a leader.

After the departure of Semenov and his people to China, only this Baron von Ungern remained and continued the work of his leader. Betrayed – obviously – by the Mongols he led against the Reds, he was captured, and died a hero.



4. – Epilogue

Chita, the end of November 1919

The personal ambitions of Ataman Semenov did not reach only to the provinces of Transbaikal, Amur and Ussuri. He dreamt of a domination in Mongolia, and I believe that he would have had – in less anxious times – chances to succeed there. The Russian was born to govern the Mongols.

Some try to deny his right to a command in the Far East, claiming that events have shown this. But in that land of small villages and fanatics of independence, no government could replace the long-gone legitimate power without a strong and devoted police. Every new government is acclaimed because it has driven out the old one. If Semenov manages to beat off the Red Army from Chita, he will return to his capital under garlands. So the Semenov problem remains.

But there is more. Admiral Kolchak, at the urging of the Allied representatives, had long recognized him as an ataman – that is, a regional chief and corps commander. Thus he was a Russian of high rank when, at the end of his reign, he was appointed commander-in-chief of all military forces in Siberia. In addition to the merits of his good start, the ataman had the rightful succession to military power in Siberia, which none of the Vladivostok generals could claim.

Opinions are divided about him. Some believe that he was incapable of any serious command. If this were true, it would not be a conclusive argument in this country of accomplished facts, and where reality always ends up being recognized.

The others fear that a new question will be created, by brutally dismissing the ataman who will never agree to disappear. They believe that his bravery, his good sense, his ascendancy over men, make him worthy of a new command, but which would be limited to the extent of his talents. His place would be particularly where he excelled: as a front-line officer, a leader of good troops who will follow if they are well led. One would forgive him his faults, remembering that he belongs to the race of the great Cossack leaders, by his education and his realistic conceptions. An elected government, composed of experienced statesmen, could employ him, respecting his autonomy in his functions of *pokhodni* ataman,⁷ to which his Cossacks have called him. Above all, he could be taught the notion that pure force can only be an instrument, and never a principle of government.

⁷ That is the military ataman of a Cossack host, as opposed to the civilian ataman leaders.

