

The Bugulma Stories

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Socialist Stories***

The commandant of the town of Bugulma

WHEN AT THE BEGINNING OF OCTOBER 1918 I WAS INFORMED BY the Revolutionary Army Soviet of the "Left-Bank Group in Simbirsk" that I had been appointed Commandant of the Town of Bugulma, I asked the chairman, Kayurov, "And do you know for sure that Bugulma has already been taken?"

"We haven't any detailed information" was the answer. "I doubt very much whether it's already in our hands at this moment, but by the time you get there I hope it'll have fallen."

"And shall I have any escort?" I asked quietly. "And one more thing — how do I get to this Bugulma? Where exactly is it?"

"You shall have an escort. You'll get twelve soldiers. And, as for your second question, look at the map. Do you think I've got nothing more to do than worry about where some idiotic Bugulma is?"

"I've got one more question, Comrade Kayurov. When shall I get the money for my fare and subsistence?"

He held up his hands in despair at such a question. "You've gone quite mad. On the journey there you'll of course have to go through some villages, where they'll give you food and drink, and at Bugulma you'll raise a levy. . . ."

My escort was waiting for me at the guardhouse below — twelve fine Chuvash lads who knew next to no Russian and so were quite incapable of explaining to me whether they were conscripts

or volunteers. From their cheerful and terrifying appearance one could safely conclude that they were very likely volunteers who would stick at nothing.

When I had been given my papers and a pile of credentials where it was emphatically stated that from Simbirsk to Bugulma every citizen must provide me with every possible help, I left for the steamer with my expedition and we sailed on the Volga and the Kama to Chistopol.

On the journey I did not meet with any special incidents, except that one of my Chuvash escorts got drunk, fell overboard, and was drowned. There were now only eleven left. When we got off the steamer at Chistopol one Chuvash volunteered to go and collect some carts but never returned. Then there were only ten and we came to the conclusion that the Chuvash who disappeared was about forty versts from his home, Montazmo, and must have gone to see what his parents were doing.

When finally, after a lengthy interrogation of the local population, I had written down everything, where that town of Bugulma was and how we would get to it, the rest of the Chuvashes found some carts and we went along that region's awful, muddy paths towards Krachalga, Yelanovo, Moskovovo, Gulukovo, Aibashevo. All of these villages were inhabited exclusively by Tartars, except for Gulukovo where Cheremisses and Tartars lived together.

Because there was frightful hostility between the Chuvashes, who had already adopted Christianity some fifty years earlier, and the Cheremisses, who were still pagan, a small misadventure occurred in Gulukovo. When my Chuvashes, who were armed to the teeth, searched a village, they brought its mayor before me — a certain Davledbai Shakir, who was holding in his hand a cage with three white squirrels in it. One of the Chuvashes, who spoke Russian best, turned to me with the following explanation:

“Chuvashes Orthodox — one, ten, thirty, fifty years. Cheremisses heathens, swine.” Tearing the cage with the white squirrels from Davledbai Shakir's hands he went on: “The white squirrel is their god — one, two, three gods. This man priest, he jump with squirrels, he jump, he pray to them. You must baptize him. . . .”

The Chuvashes looked so menacing that I ordered some water to be brought and sprinkled it over Davledbai Shakir, mumbling some incomprehensible words, after which I released him.

My lads then skinned the Cheremisses' gods and I can assure everyone that the Lord God of the Cheremisses makes a very fine soup.

After that the local Mohammedan mullah Abdulhalei came to visit me and expressed his pleasure that we had eaten those squirrels. "Everyone has to believe in something," he said. "But to believe in squirrels — that's sheer beastliness. They jump from tree to tree and when they are in a cage they make a filthy mess. Fine gods indeed!" He brought us lavish helpings of roast mutton, and three geese, assuring us that if the Cheremisses were to revolt in the night all the Tartars would be on our side.

Nothing happened because, as Davledbai Shakir said when he came to see us off in the morning, there are lots of squirrels in the forest. Finally, we went through Aibashevo and, in the evening, without any incidents reached Little Pisetsnitse, a Russian village twelve versts from Bugulma. The local inhabitants were very well informed about what was happening in Bugulma. Three days earlier the Whites had abandoned the town without a fight. The Soviet army stood on the other side of the town and were afraid to go in for fear of a trap.

There was anarchy in the town, and the mayor and all his council had been waiting for two days with bread and salt to greet whomsoever entered the town.

I sent ahead the Chuvash who could speak Russian best and in the morning we moved on to Bugulma. On the outskirts of the town an endless crowd of people came to meet us. The mayor held a loaf of bread on a salver and some salt in a saucer.

In his speech he expressed the hope that I would have mercy on the town. I could imagine that I was Žižka at the gates of Prague, especially when I saw schoolchildren in the procession.

I thanked him in a long speech, cutting a slice of bread and sprinkling salt over it. I emphasized that I had not come to mouth slogans but that my aim would be peace, quiet, and order. Finally I

kissed the mayor, shook hands with the representative of the Orthodox clergy, and went to the town hall, where offices for the Commandant of the Town had been assigned to me.

After that I had Order No. 1 posted up with the following contents:

Citizens!

I thank you for your warm and sincere welcome and your hospitality with bread and salt. Always cherish these old Slav customs, to which I have no objection, but at the same time please do not forget that I have been appointed Commandant of the Town and that I have my duties too.

I therefore ask you, dear friends, to hand in all your weapons at the town hall at the headquarters of the Commandant tomorrow at about noon. I don't wish to threaten anyone, but you are aware that the town is in a state of siege.

I should like to add also that I was to have imposed a levy upon the town, but I now declare that the town will not have to pay any dues.

Signed: Gashek

The next day, at about twelve o'clock, the square was full of armed men. Well over a thousand came with rifles. Someone had even brought a machine gun.

The eleven of us might easily have disappeared in this flood of armed men, but they came to hand in their weapons. They went on with it until late in the evening, while I shook everyone by the hand and said a friendly word or two.

In the morning I had printed and posted up Order No. 2:

Citizens!

I should like to thank all the inhabitants of Bugulma for the punctilious fulfilment of Order No. 1.

Signed: Gashek

That day I went happily to bed, unconscious that a sword of Damocles was hanging over my head in the shape of the Tver Revolutionary Regiment.

As I have said, the Soviet army stood on the other side of Bugulma about fifty versts to the south and, fearing a trap, did not dare enter it, until finally they received the order from the Revolutionary Army Soviet at Simbirsk to occupy it at all costs and secure it as a base for the Soviet armies operating east of it.

And so Comrade Yerokhimov, the Commander of the Tver Revolutionary Regiment, came that night to occupy and conquer Bugulma, when I had already been, for three days in the fear of God, the Commandant of the Town and was officiating to the general satisfaction of all classes of the populace.

When the Tver Regiment "penetrated" the town, they fired salvos into the air as they passed through the streets, and the only resistance they encountered came from my bodyguard of two Chuvashes, who were woken up while on guard at the door of the Commandant of the Town and would not let Comrade Yerokhimov into the town hall when, with a revolver in his hand, he was coming to take possession of it at the head of his regiment.



My Chuvashes were taken prisoner and Yerokhimov broke into my office and bedroom.

"Hands up," he said, drunk with victory and pointing a revolver at me. I calmly put up my hands.

"And who are you?" the Commander of the Tver Regiment asked.

"I am the Commandant of the Town."

"Of the Whites or the Soviet army?"

"The Soviet. May I put my hands down?"

"You can, but I beg you, according to the rules of war, at once to hand over to me the command of the town, because I have conquered Bugulma."

"But I was appointed Commandant," I objected.

"To hell with your being appointed. You've got to conquer it first."

"D'you know what?" he said, magnanimously after a short while. "I appoint you my adjutant. If you don't agree I'll have you shot in five minutes."

"I've nothing against being your adjutant," I answered, and called my orderly. "Vasily, prepare the samovar. We'll have some tea with the new Commandant of the Town, who has just conquered Bugulma. . . ."

All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass.

The adjutant of the commandant of the town of Bugulma

MY FIRST JOB WAS TO FREE MY TWO CAPTURED CHUVASHES AND go and make up for the sleep I had lost through the coup in the town. Towards noon I woke up and found, first, that all my Chuvashes had mysteriously disappeared, leaving behind a letter for me with fairly incomprehensible contents stuck in one of my boots: "Comrade Gashek, go look plenty help round about here and there. Comrade Yerokhimov *bashka-khawa* [head off]." Next, I found that Comrade Yerokhimov had been sweating from the early morning trying to compose his first order to the inhabitants of Bugulma.

"Comrade Adjutant," he said to me, "do you think it will be all right like this?" From a pile of draft orders covered with writing he took a sheet of paper with lines crossed out and words inserted and read:

To the whole population of Bugulma.

Today, with the fall of Bugulma, I have taken over command of the town. I am dismissing the former Commandant from his post on grounds of incompetence and cowardice and am appointing him my adjutant.

Commandant of the Town: Yerokhimov

"That covers everything," I said approvingly. "And what do you intend to do next?"

"First of all," he answered gravely and solemnly, "I shall order a mobilization of horses. Then I shall have the mayor shot. Then I shall take ten hostages from the bourgeoisie and send them to prison until the end of the civil war. After that I shall carry out a general house-search in the town and prohibit free trading. That'll do for the first day, and tomorrow I'll think up something else."

"Permit me to point out," I said, "that I have nothing at all against a mobilization of horses, but I definitely protest against the shooting of the mayor who welcomed me with bread and salt."

Yerokhimov jumped up "He welcomed you, and hasn't come to see me yet? . . ."

"That can be put right," I said. "We'll send for him." And I sat down at the table and wrote:

The Office of the Commandant
of the Town of Bugulma

No. 2891

Operational Army

To the Mayor of the Town of Bugulma!

I order you to come immediately to the new Commandant of the Town with bread and salt according to the old Slav custom.

Commandant of the Town: Yerokhimov

Adjutant: Gashek

When Yerokhimov signed it he added, "If not, you will be shot and your house burned down."

"You can't add anything like that to official documents," I told him. "It would invalidate them."

I copied it out again in its original wording and formulation, had it signed, and sent it off by an orderly officer.

"Further," I said to Yerokhimov, "I am definitely opposed to ten people from the bourgeoisie being sent to prison until the end of the civil war, because that can only be decided by the Revolutionary Tribunal."

"The Revolutionary Tribunal," said Yerokhimov gravely. "But that's what we are. The town is in our hands."

"There you're mistaken, Comrade Yerokhimov. What are we? Just a damned rotten couple of ordinary people. The Commandant of the Town and his adjutant. The Revolutionary Tribunal is appointed by the Revolutionary Army Soviet of the Eastern Front. Do you want them to put you up against the wall?"

"Very well then," Yerokhimov replied with a sigh. "But surely no one can stop us from carrying out a general house-search?"

"According to the decree of the 18th June of this year," I answered, "a general house-search can only be carried out with the consent of the local Revolutionary Committee or Soviet. Since nothing like that exists yet, let's leave the house-search until later."

"You're an angel," said Yerokhimov tenderly. "Without you I would have been sunk. But surely we must stop the free trading?"

"Most of those who carry on trade and go to the bazaars are from the country," I tried to explain. "They are muzhiks who can't read or write. First of all they'll have to learn to be literate, and then they will be able to read our orders and understand what they're about. First we must teach the illiterate population to read and write, see that they understand what we want of them, and then we can issue orders—perhaps even for a mobilization of horses. Tell me, Comrade Yerokhimov, why are you so insistent on carrying out a mobilization of horses? Perhaps you want to change the Revolutionary Tver Regiment into a cavalry division? You know that for that there is 'The Inspector for Forming the Armies of the Left-Bank Group', don't you?"

"You're right again, Comrade Gashek," said Yerokhimov with a sigh. "What am I to do?"

"Teach the people of the Bugulma region to read and write," I answered. "And as for me, I'll go and see whether your chaps aren't up to some mischief and how they're billeted."

I went away and walked about the town. The Tver Revolutionary Regiment were behaving respectably. They were not oppressing anyone, they had made friends with the population, they were drinking tea, they had *pele-mele*, *shchi*, and *borshch*

cooked for them, shared their shag and sugar with their hosts — in short everything was in order. I also went to have a look at Little Bugulma, where the first battalion of the regiment had been quartered. There too I found the same idyll. The men were drinking tea, eating *borshch*, and behaving respectably.

I returned late in the evening and at the corner of the square I saw a freshly posted placard which read:

To the whole population of Bugulma and its Region!

I order everyone in the whole town and region who cannot read and write to learn to do so within three days. Anyone found to be illiterate after this time will be shot.

Commandant of the Town: Yerokhimov

When I came to Yerokhimov, he was sitting with the mayor who had brought with him not only bread and salt, which was carefully laid out on the table, but a few bottles of old Lithuanian vodka as well. Yerokhimov, who was in a good mood and was embracing the mayor, shouted at me as I came in, "Have you read how I've followed your advice? I went myself into the printing works and drew my revolver on the director: 'Print this at once, my little love-bird, or I'll shoot you on the spot, you son of a bitch.' He started to tremble, the vermin. He read it, and trembled still more. And then — I went *bang! bang!* at the ceiling. . . . And he printed it. He printed it beautifully. To know how to read and write, that's the main thing! Then you issue the order, they all can read, it's understood, and they are happy. That's right, isn't it, Mayor? Have a drink, Comrade Gashek!"

I declined.

"Will you have a drink or not?" he shouted.

I drew my revolver and shot at the bottles of Lithuanian vodka. Then aiming at my superior, I said with some vehemence, "Go and lie down at once, or. . . ."

"I'm going, my little love-bird, soul of mine. I didn't mean it seriously, just having a little fun and celebration."

I took Yerokhimov off, put him to bed, and returning to the

mayor, said to him, "It's the first time it's happened, so I forgive you. Run home and be glad that you've got out of it so easily."

Yerokhimov slept till two o'clock in the afternoon the next day. When he woke up he sent for me and, looking at me in some uncertainty, said, "I have the impression that you wanted to shoot me yesterday."

"Yes, I did," I answered. "I wanted to forestall what the Revolutionary Tribunal would have done to you when they learned that as the Commandant of the Town you had got drunk."

"But, my little love-bird, you won't tell anybody about it, will you? I won't do it again. I'll teach people to read and write. . . ."

In the evening the first deputation of muzhiks arrived from the region of Karlagin. There were six old grandmas between sixty and eighty years old and five old grandpas of the same age.

They threw themselves at my feet. "Don't destroy our souls, little father, *batyushka*. We can't learn to read and write in three days. Our heads can't manage it. Saviour of ours, have mercy on the district."



"The order is invalid," I said. "It was all the fault of that idiot, the Commandant of the Town, Yerokhimov."

In the night a few more deputations arrived, but by the morning new placards had already been posted up everywhere and sent to the villages around. The text was as follows:

To the whole population of Bugulma and its Region!

I proclaim that I have dismissed the Commandant of the Town, Comrade Yerokhimov, and have resumed office. Herewith his order No. 1, and his order No. 2 concerning the liquidation of illiteracy within three days are invalidated.

Commandant of the Town: Gashek

I could afford to do this because during the night the Petrograd Cavalry Regiment had arrived in the town. My Chuvashes had brought them to deal with Yerokhimov.

The procession of the cross

THE COMMANDANT OF THE TOWN, YEROKHIMOV, WHOM I HAD dismissed from his post, issued an order to the whole Revolutionary Tver Regiment to evacuate the town in battle formation and encamp beyond it. He then came to take leave of me. I assured him that if he and his regiment ever tried to cause further unpleasantness I would have them disarmed and send him to the Revolutionary Army Tribunal of the Front. After all, we were putting our cards on the table.

Comrade Yerokhimov for his part assured me with great frankness that as soon as the Petrograd Cavalry Regiment left the town he would have me hanged on the hill over Little Bugulma so that I could be seen from all directions.

We shook hands and parted the best of friends.

After his departure with the regiment I had to find comfortable accommodation for the Petrograd Cavalry, which consisted mostly of volunteers, and get the barracks cleaned for them. Indeed I made up my mind to do everything possible to see that these splendid chaps were happy in Bugulma and would not rebel against me one fine day.

But whom was I to send to clean the barracks, scrub the floors, and make everything tidy? Definitely people who had nothing to do.

Among the local population everyone was doing something and working. I thought it over for a long time until I remembered

that near the town there was a big convent, the Convent of the Most Holy Virgin, where the nuns did nothing else but pray and slander one another. And so I wrote the following official letter to the igumen [abbess]:

The Army Command of the Town of Bugulma,

No. 3896,

Operational Army.

To the Citizen Igumen of the Convent of the Most Holy Virgin:

Send at once fifty maidens from your convent to be at the disposal of the Petrograd Cavalry Regiment. Send them straight to the barracks.

Supreme Commandant of the Town: Gashek

The letter was despatched, and about half an hour later an extraordinarily beautiful and powerful peal of bells could be heard from the convent. All the bells of the Convent of the Most Holy Virgin groaned and wailed and were answered by those of the town church.

The orderly officer reported to me that the head priest of the main church, accompanied by the local clergy, was asking if I would receive him. I nodded amiably and a number of bearded priests poured into my office. Their spokesman said, "Mr. Comrade Commandant, I am coming to you in the name not only of the local clergy but of the whole Orthodox Church. Do not ruin the innocent convent maidens. We have just had news from the convent that you want fifty nuns for the Petrograd Cavalry Regiment. Remember that the Lord is above us!"

"At the moment only the ceiling is above us," I answered cynically. "And as for the nuns it must be as I said. I need fifty of them for the barracks. If it should prove that thirty will be enough for the job, I shall send the remaining twenty back. If fifty are not enough, I shall take a hundred, two hundred, or three hundred of them from the convent. It doesn't matter a rap to me. And as for you, gentlemen, I must warn you that you are interfering in official

matters and so I am constrained to fine you. Each of you will bring me three pounds of wax candles, a dozen eggs, and a pound of butter. I authorize you, Citizen Head Priest, to arrange with the Abbess the time when she will send me those fifty nuns of hers. Tell her that I need them really urgently and that I shall return them again. Not a single one of them will get lost."

The Orthodox clergy left my office very downcast indeed.

In the doorway the most senior of them, with the longest beard and hair, turned round to me and said, "Remember that the Lord is above us."

"I beg your pardon," I said. "You will bring not three but five pounds of candles."

It was a glorious October afternoon. There had been a severe frost and the cursed mud of Bugulma had become crusted. Crowds hurrying to the church began to fill the streets. The bells rang gravely and solemnly in the town and in the convent. This time they were not sounding the alarm but calling all Orthodox Bugulma to a "Procession of the Cross".



It was only at the worst times in Bugulma's history that a Procession of the Cross took place — when the Tartars besieged the town, when pestilence and smallpox raged, when war broke out, when they shot the Tsar, and now. The bells rang meltingly, as though they were about to burst into tears.

The gates of the convent opened and out they came with icons and banners. Four of the eldest nuns with the Abbess at the head were carrying a large icon, a heavy one.

The image of the Most Holy Virgin stared aghast from the icon. And following it walked a number of nuns, old and young, all dressed in black, singing psalms: "And they led Him away to crucify Him. They crucified Him and two others with Him, one on the right hand and the other on the left."

And at the same time the Orthodox priesthood came out from the town church in gold-embroidered chasubles, followed by the Orthodox community in a long procession, carrying icons.

Both processions met and cried, "Christ liveth! Christ is King! Christ is victorious!"

And the whole crowd began to sing: "I know that my Redeemer liveth and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth."

The procession moved round the church and then turned towards the office of the Commandant of the Town where I had already made worthy preparations.

Before the building stood a table covered with a white cloth, on which there was a loaf of bread and salt in a salt cellar. In the right-hand corner stood an icon and around it there were lighted candles. When the procession came in front of the office of the Commandant I came out with dignity and asked the Abbess to accept bread and salt as proof that I did not harbour any hostile intentions. I also asked the Orthodox priesthood to cut off a slice of bread. They came, one by one, and kissed the icon.

"Orthodox men and women," I said solemnly. "I thank you for your beautiful and extremely attractive Procession of the Cross. I have seen it for the first time in my life and it has left on me an impression which I shall remember to my dying day. I see here a

crowd of nuns singing and I am reminded of the processions of the early Christians in the days of Nero. It may be that some of you have read *Quo Vadis?* But I will not tax your patience any longer, Orthodox men and women. I asked for only fifty nuns, but now that the whole convent is here we shall be finished quicker, and so may I ask mesdemoiselles nuns to follow me to the barracks."

The crowds stood bare-headed before me and sang in answer, "The heavens declare the glory of God: and the firmament sheweth His handiwork. Day after day He exalts and night after night He reveals the wonder of His works."

The Abbess stepped forward before me. Her aged chin was trembling as she asked, "In the name of the Heavenly Father, what are we going to do there? Do not destroy your soul."

"Orthodox men and women," I shouted to the crowd. "The floors are to be scrubbed and the barracks cleaned so that the Petrograd Cavalry Regiment can be quartered there. Let's go."

The crowd followed me, and with such a quantity of industrious hands the barracks were put into perfect order by the evening.

The same evening a young and pretty nun brought me a small icon and a letter from the aged igumen containing the simple sentence: "I am praying for you."

Since that day I sleep in peace, because I know that up to this very day, in the old oak forests of Bugulma, there is the Convent of the Most Holy Virgin, where an aged igumen lives and prays for me, wretched good-for-nothing that I am.

In strategic difficulties

AT THE END OF OCTOBER 1918 THE FOLLOWING ORDER FROM THE Revolutionary Council of the Eastern Front reached me at my headquarters at Bugulma: "The 16th Division of the Light Artillery is on the march. Prepare sledges for its transport to the front."

I was at a loss what to make of the telegram. What sort of a division was it? How many thousand men did it have? Where would I get so many sledges? You see, in military matters I was a complete layman. Austria had not provided me with a professional military education and had resisted tooth and nail any attempt on my part to penetrate the mysteries of the art of warfare.

At the beginning of the war they threw me out of the officers' school of the 91st Infantry Regiment and tore off my one-year volunteer's stripes as well. While the others of my age-group received the titles of cadets and ensigns and fell like flies on all fronts, I sat locked up in the barracks gaol in Budějovice and in Bruck an der Leitha. When they finally let me out and wanted to draft me to the front with march companies, I hid in a haystack and in this way outlasted three of them. After that I pretended I had epilepsy, and they came very near to shooting me, but I volunteered for the front. From that moment on, fortune smiled on me, and when, on the march near Sambor, I managed to find Lieutenant Lukas an apartment with a very charming Polish lady and first-class cuisine, I was promoted to orderly officer.

When later, near Sokal, lice appeared in the billet of our battalion commander, I caught them all, anointed my superior with mercury ointment in the trenches, and received the Great Silver Medal for bravery.

But with all that, no one ever initiated me into the mysteries of the art of warfare. Today I still have no inkling of how many regiments make up a battalion and into how many companies a brigade is divided. And here in Bugulma I was required to know how many sledges were necessary for the transport of a division of light artillery. None of my Chuvashes knew either, and that was why I sentenced them conditionally to three days' imprisonment. If they found out the answer within a year, their punishment would be remitted.

I summoned the mayor and said to him sternly, "I have learned that you are concealing from me the number of men there are in a division of light artillery."

At first he could not utter a word. Then he threw himself on to the ground, started to hug my legs, and wailed, "Have mercy on



me. Do not destroy me. I never spread any such rumours."

I raised him up, treated him to tea and shag, and let him go with the assurance that in this case I was convinced of his innocence.

He went home and sent me a roast sucking-pig with a dish of pickled mushrooms. I ate the whole lot, but still didn't know how many men there were in a division and how many sledges were required for them.

I sent for the Commander of the Petrograd Cavalry Regiment and in the course of conversation casually referred to the matter.

"It's very peculiar," I said, "how the Centre is continually changing the number of men in the light artillery divisions. It's particularly awkward now, when the Red Army is being organized. You don't know by any chance, Comrade Commander, how many men there used to be in a division before?"

He spat and answered, "We're cavalry men and the artillery's no concern of ours. I myself don't know how many men I ought to have in my own regiment, because they never sent me any directives. I received an order to make up a regiment, so I collected the men. One man had a friend and another had one too, and that's how it gradually grew. When there are a lot of them, I'll perhaps call it a brigade. What are the Cossacks compared to us?"

When he went away, I knew just as much as I did before, and to crown my misfortune I received the following telegram from Simbirsk:

Due precarious position on front you are appointed Commander of Front. In event of breakthrough of our positions on river Ik, withdraw regiments to position Kluchevo - Bugulma. Organize extraordinary commission for defence of town as soon as enemy comes within fifty versts. Mobilize inhabitants up to age of fifty-two and distribute weapons. At favourable moment blow up railway bridge over Ik and at Kluchevo. Send armoured train on reconnaissance and blow up railway track. . . .

The telegram fell out of my hand and, when I pulled myself together after my initial horror, I read on to the very end:

Set fire to elevator. Destroy what you cannot take away with you. Await reinforcements and arrange billeting and regular provisioning of army. Organize supply train and regular dispatch of cartridges to front. Start publishing magazine in Tartar and Russian to satisfy inhabitants. Appoint revolutionary committee. Failure to execute these orders or any errors will be punished in accordance with wartime laws.

Revolutionary Army Council of Eastern Front

It was towards evening and I had not lit the lamps. I sat in my chair and, when later the moon peeped through the window into my office, she saw a man sitting in the same chair, holding a telegram in his hand and staring idiotically into the grey gloom of the office.

And this is how the early morning sun found me. Towards morning the icon hanging in the corner could bear it no longer. It fell from the wall and broke in pieces.

The Chuvash on guard in front of my doors peered inside and reproachfully threatened the icon with his finger: "You bastard, you. You fall and fall and wake chap up."

Towards morning I took out of my pocket a picture of my late mother. Tears welled in my eyes and I whispered, "Dear Mama! When years ago I lived with you at No. 4 Milešovská in the Royal Vineyards in Prague, you never thought that fifteen years later your poor little son would have to withdraw regiments to positions at Kluchevo - Bugulma, blow up a railway bridge on the river Ik and at Kluchevo, blow up railway tracks, set an elevator on fire, and hold out to the last man in defence of the town - apart from other things. Why didn't I become a Benedictine instead, as you wanted me to, when for the first time I was ploughed in my examinations in the fourth class at school. I should have had peace. I should have served Holy Mass and drunk the monastery wine."

And, as though in answer, something began to rumble suspiciously in the south-eastern quarter of the town and after that it rumbled a second and a third time.

"That's some artillery fire!" said the orderly officer, who had just returned from the front. "Kapel's men have crossed the Ik and are advancing together against us on the right wing together with the Polish division. The Tver Regiment is retreating."

I sent the following order to the front:

If General Kapel's group has crossed the Ik and is advancing with the Polish division against our right wing, cross the Ik on the other side and proceed against them on the left wing. I am sending the Petrograd Cavalry against enemy's rear.

I summoned the Commander of the Petrograd Cavalry. "They have broken through our positions," I told him. "It will now be all the easier for you to get to the enemy's rear and capture the whole Polish division."

"Very well," the Commander replied. He saluted and went off.

I went to the telegraph apparatus and wired to Simbirsk:

Great victory. Positions on river Ik broken through. We are attacking from all directions. Cavalry in enemy's rear. Heaps of prisoners.

The glorious days of Bugulma

NAPOLEON WAS A PRIZE IDIOT. WHAT TROUBLE THE POOR fellow went to to probe the mysteries of strategy! What a lot he had to study before he hit upon the idea of his unbroken front! He was at military schools in Brienne and Paris and even had his own military tactics all worked out—and yet he took a beating at Waterloo.

Many others followed his example and always got a thrashing. Today, after the glorious days of Bugulma, the victories of Napoleon, from the occupation of Cape L'Aiguilletta, and on through Mantua and Castiglione, Aspern, etc., seem appalling nonsense. I am certain that if Napoleon had acted at Waterloo as I did, he would have decisively smashed Wellington.

In that battle Blücher fell on Napoleon's *right flank*, and Napoleon should have done what I did at Bugulma, when the volunteer corps of General Kapel and the Polish division were on our right wing.

Why did Napoleon not order his guard to fall on Blücher's *left flank*, just as I did in my order to the Petrograd Cavalry?

The Petrograd Cavalry worked sheer miracles, because the Russian land is indescribably vast and a few miles here or there do not matter. They rode as far as Menzelinsk, and came to the region of Chishma and God knows where else in the enemy's rear, and they drove him before them, so that his victory ended in a defeat.

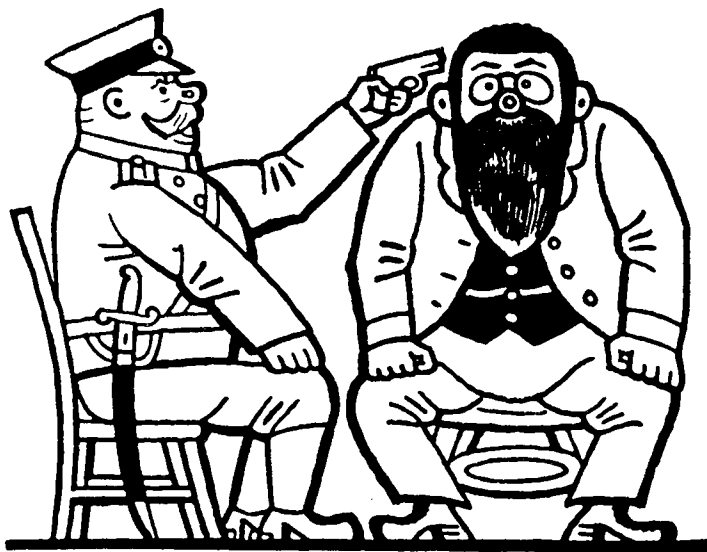
Unfortunately the majority of our enemies used the opportunity to withdraw to Belebei and Buguruslan, and the minority driven from behind by the Petrograd Cavalry came to within fifteen versts of Bugulma.

In those glorious days of Bugulma the Tver Revolutionary Regiment with Comrade Yerokhimov at their head were constantly in retreat before the defeated enemy.

In the evening they always dispersed all over the Tartar villages and, when they had devoured all the geese and chickens, they retreated again nearer to Bugulma and dispersed all over other villages until finally they entered the town in full order.

From the printing works they came running to tell me that the Commander of the Tver Regiment, Yerokhimov, was threatening the manager with a revolver and insisting on having a certain order and proclamation printed.

I took with me my four Chuvashes, two Brownings, and a Colt revolver, and hurried to the printing works, where I found the manager seated in the office on one chair and Comrade Yerokhimov close to him on the other. The manager was in a rather



unpleasant predicament, because his neighbour was holding a revolver to his temple and repeating over and over again, "Are you going to print this or aren't you? Are you going to print this or aren't you?"

I heard the manager's manly answer: "I am not going to print it. I just can't, old man," whereupon his neighbour with the revolver implored him, "Print it, soul of mine, sweetheart, little love-bird, print it, I beg you."

When they saw me, Yerokhimov rushed forward to meet me in evident embarrassment, embraced me, and shook my hand cordially. Turning to the manager, he winked at him and said, "We've been chatting together now for half an hour. It's a long time since I've seen him."

I noticed that the manager spat and growled openly, "A fine chat, I must say!"

"I heard you wanted to get something printed again," I said to Yerokhimov, "a proclamation, an order, or something. Would you be good enough to let me read the text?"

"I was only joking, Comrade Gashek, only having a little joke," Yerokhimov answered in a very unhappy tone. "I didn't mean to make anything of it."

I took from the table the original of what was to be printed and what was never to be read by the citizens of Bugulma. They would certainly have been surprised at what Yerokhimov had prepared for them, because it ran:

Proclamation No. 1.

Returning at the head of the victorious Tver Revolutionary Regiment, I hereby proclaim that I am taking over the administration of the town and district. I am organizing an extraordinary revolutionary tribunal and I shall be president of it. Its first session will be tomorrow and the matter which is to be discussed is of great importance. The Commandant of the Town, Comrade Gashek, will appear before the Extraordinary Revolutionary Tribunal, because he is a counter-

revolutionary and a conspirator. If he is condemned to be shot, the sentence will be carried out within twelve hours. I warn the population that any revolt will be punished on the spot.

Yerokhimov,
Commandant of the Town and district

And my friend Yerokhimov intended to add to this the following order:

Order No. 3

The Extraordinary Revolutionary Tribunal of the Military District of Bugulma announces that by the decision of the Extraordinary Revolutionary Tribunal the former Commandant of the Town, Gashek, was shot for counter-revolution and conspiracy against the Soviet government.

Yerokhimov,
President of the Extraordinary Revolutionary Committee

"It's really nothing but a little joke, my little love-bird," Yerokhimov said in a soothing voice. "Do you want my revolver? Take it! Why would I want to shoot anybody?"

I was struck by his mild tone. Then I turned round and saw that my four Chuvashes were pointing their rifles at him and looking at the same time terrifyingly harsh and menacing.

I commanded them to order arms, took the revolver from Yerokhimov, who fixed his childlike blue eyes on me and said quietly, "Am I under arrest or at liberty?"

I smiled. "You're a fool, Comrade Yerokhimov. Nobody gets locked up for little jokes like that. You yourself said that it was really nothing but a little joke. But I ought to lock you up for something else — your disgraceful return. The Poles were crushed by our Petrograd Cavalry and yet you retreated before them all the way to the town. Do you know that I have a telegram from Simbirsk, ordering the Tver Revolutionary Regiment to win new

laurels once more for its old revolutionary banner? I return you this revolver, which you handed over to me, but on one condition — that you immediately leave the town, encircle the Poles, and bring in prisoners. But you must not touch a single hair of their heads. I'm warning you that if you do, it will be all up with you. I'm sure you'll agree that we mustn't make fools of ourselves in the eyes of Simbirsk. I have already telegraphed that the Tver Regiment has brought in a lot of prisoners."

I struck the table with my fist. "And where have you got those prisoners? Where have you got them?"

And, brandishing my fist under his nose, I added in a terrifyingly angry voice, "Just wait! You'll pay for this! Have you anything to say to me before you go off with your regiment to get those prisoners? You realize I am the Commander of the Front, the highest authority here?"

Yerokhimov stood straight as a candle. Only his eyes twitched with agitation. Finally he saluted and declared, "This very evening I shall crush the Poles and bring in prisoners. Thank you."

I gave him back his revolver, shook his hand, and cordially took my leave of him.

Yerokhimov kept his word splendidly. By morning the Tver Regiment had begun to bring in prisoners. The barracks were soon full of them and we did not know where to put them. But when I went to have a look at them I nearly fainted with shock: instead of the Polish soldiers, Yerokhimov had collected peasants — the Tartar residents from all over the villages — because the Poles had not waited for the Tver Regiment's surprise attack but had fled like cowards.

New dangers

THERE WAS NO DOUBT ABOUT IT; COMRADE YEROKHIMOV COULD not understand that the peaceful Tartars, the local population, were not the Poles, and when I issued the order that all the supposed "prisoners", whom he was collecting in the villages, should be set at liberty, he felt insulted, went to the military telegraph office of the Petrograd Cavalry Regiment, and tried to send the following telegram to the Revolutionary Army Council of the Eastern Front at Simbirsk:

Report that, after three days' fighting, I have destroyed enemy with my Tver Revolutionary Regiment. Enemy's losses enormous. Captured twelve hundred Whites, whom Town Commandant has set free. Request despatch special commission investigate whole affair. Town Commandant, Comrade Gashek, completely unreliable, counter-revolutionary, and has contacts with enemy. Request permission organize *Cheka*.

Yerokhimov,
Commander Tver Revolutionary Regiment

The head of the telegraph office accepted the telegram from Comrade Yerokhimov, assuring him that it would be sent as soon as the line was free. He then got into his sledge and came to see me.

"Well, here's a pretty mess, *batyushka*," he said to me with an expression of utter despair. "Read it." He handed me Comrade Yerokhimov's telegram.

I read it and put it calmly into my pocket. The head of the telegraph office began to scratch his head and blink nervously, saying, "You must admit that my position is a difficult one, a damned difficult one. According to the orders of the Peoples' Commissariat I have to accept telegrams from regimental commanders. And you seem not to want me to despatch this one. I didn't come here to put it into your hands, but just so that you should know about its contents and so that you could send another telegram against Comrade Yerokhimov."

I told the head of the telegraph office that I had a very high opinion of the Peoples' Commissariat for War, but we were not at the Base where they were. "This is the Front. I'm the Commander of the Front and I can do what I like. I order you to accept from Comrade Yerokhimov as many telegrams as he wants to write. But I forbid you to despatch them and I order you to bring them to me at once.

"For the time being," I concluded, "I leave you at liberty, but I warn you that the smallest deviation from our program will have consequences which you are quite incapable of imagining."

I drank tea with him while we talked about quite ordinary things and I took leave of him with the warning that he must tell Yerokhimov that the telegram had been sent.

After supper the Chuvash, who stood on guard, reported to me that the whole High Command building was surrounded by two companies of the Tver Revolutionary Regiment and that Comrade Yerokhimov was addressing them and announcing that the tyranny was over.

And sure enough, shortly afterwards Comrade Yerokhimov appeared in my office accompanied by ten soldiers with fixed bayonets who stationed themselves at the doors.

Without addressing a word to me, Comrade Yerokhimov began to post his men in various places around the office.

"You go here, you here, you stand here, you go there in the

corner. You place yourself by the table, you stand by that window, you by that one, and you will stay close to me."

I rolled a cigarette and, by the time I had lit it, I was surrounded by bayonets and could observe with interest what Comrade Yerokhimov would do next.

It was clear from his look of uncertainty that he did not know how to set about it. He approached the table with official documents, tore up two or three of them, and then walked up and down the office for a while, a soldier with a bayonet close at his heels.

The others, who stood around me in all corners, assumed solemn expressions, until one of them — a very young one — asked, "Comrade Yerokhimov, may we smoke?"

"Yes," answered Yerokhimov and sat down opposite me. I offered him tobacco and cigarette paper. He began to smoke and said in a hesitant tone, "Is that Simbirsk tobacco?"

"No, it's from the Don region," I answered briefly and began to leaf through the documents lying on the table as if he were not there.

There was a painful silence. At last Yerokhimov said quietly, "What would you say, Comrade Gashek, if I were President of the *Cheka*?"

"Then I could only congratulate you," I answered. "Wouldn't you care for another smoke?"

He lit a cigarette and continued rather sadly, "And now imagine that I really am that, Comrade Gashek, that I've been appointed President of the *Cheka* of the Revolutionary Army Council of the Eastern Front."

He stood up and added emphatically, "And imagine that you are in my hands."

"First," I answered calmly, "show me your authorization."

"Damn the authorization," said Yerokhimov. "I can arrest you even without authorization if I want to."

I gave a smile. "Comrade Yerokhimov, sit down quietly, where you sat before. They'll bring the samovar in a minute and we'll have a chat about how presidents of the *Cheka* are appointed."

"And you've got no business here," I said turning to

Yerokhimov's escort around me. "Clear off! Tell them to make themselves scarce, Comrade Yerokhimov."

Yerokhimov smiled in embarrassment. "All right, my dears, go and tell the men outside that they're to go home too."

When all of them had gone away and the samovar was brought in, I said to Yerokhimov, "You see, if you'd really had the authorization, you'd have been able to arrest me and shoot me, and do everything to me that you imagined you would — if you were President of the *Cheka*."

"I'll get that authorization," Yerokhimov replied quietly. "I'll certainly get it, my dear."

I took Yerokhimov's unfortunate telegram out of my pocket and showed it to him.

Yerokhimov was overwhelmed. "How did that get to you?" he said in a crushed tone. "They should have sent it off a long time ago."

"The position is, my dear friend," I answered affably, "that all army telegrams have to be signed by the Commander of the Front



and therefore they brought me your telegram for signature. If you wish to send it and insist on doing so, I shall willingly sign it, and you can take it to the telegraph office yourself, so you can see I'm not afraid of you."

Yerokhimov took his telegram and tore it up. He started to whine and sob. "My sweet soul, my little love-bird, I didn't really mean it. Please forgive me, my dear and only friend."

We drank tea until two o'clock in the morning. He stayed the night with me and we slept on one bed. In the morning we drank tea again and I gave him a quarter of a pound of good tobacco for the journey home.

Potemkin's villages*

EIGHT DAYS HAD ALREADY PASSED SINCE THE GLORIOUS DAYS of Bugulma and there was still no trace of the Petrograd Cavalry Regiment. Comrade Yerokhimov, who had been very zealous about visiting me since the last affair, expressed every day certain suspicions that the Petrograd Cavalry had gone over to the enemy. He proposed that I should, first, proclaim them traitors to the Republic; second, send a telegram to Trotsky in Moscow describing in detail their shameful desertion; third, organize a Revolutionary Tribunal of the Front and summon before it the Commandant of the Telegraph Office of the Petrograd Cavalry, because he must know what was happening — and if he did not, summon him all the same, because he was responsible for communications.

Comrade Yerokhimov was very punctual with his campaign of agitation against the Petrograd Cavalry. He arrived at eight o'clock in the morning and went on agitating against them until half-past nine. Then he departed only to reappear at two o'clock and start a new campaign of agitation which he continued until four. In the evening he came again and went on agitating over tea once more until ten or eleven o'clock in the evening.

All the time he walked about the office with his head down,

* When Catherine the Great was being shown around the Crimea, which Russia had just annexed, her lover, the Russian statesman Potemkin, constructed fake villages to make the region appear more populated. Hence, the expression "Potemkin's villages".

repeating gloomily, "What a frightful thing to do! What a disgrace for the Revolution! Let's telegraph. Let's get into direct contact with Moscow!"

"It'll turn out all right in the end," I consoled him. "A time will come, Comrade Yerokhimov, when you'll see the Petrograders return."

Meanwhile I received a telegram from the Army Revolutionary Council of the Eastern Front:

Report number of prisoners. Your last telegram on great victory at Bugulma unclear. Despatch Petrograd Cavalry to Third Army at Buguruslan. Report whether all orders in our previous telegram carried out. Also report how many copies of propaganda magazine you have published in Tartar and Russian. State magazine's title. Send courier with detailed account of your activities. Send Tver Revolutionary Regiment to advantageous positions. Prepare leaflets appealing to soldiers of White Army to desert to our side and have them dropped from aircraft. Every error or failure to comply with individual points will be punished in accordance with laws of wartime.

In no time I received still another telegram:

Do not send courier. Await arrival Inspector Eastern Front with Commander Political Department Revolutionary Army Soviet together with member of Soviet, Comrade Morozov. They have been invested with full powers.

Comrade Yerokhimov happened to be present at that moment. When I had read through the last telegram I passed it to him to see what effect an awe-inspiring inspection like this would have on him. After all it was just what he had wanted.

One could see that a difficult struggle was going on inside him. What an opportunity to avenge himself on me, to gloat over

my misfortunes! But the happy smile which had lit up his face in the first moment soon disappeared and was transformed into a look of worry and mental torment.

"You're done for, my little love-bird," he said sadly. "You'll lose that wild and wanton head of yours."

He walked up and down the office, singing wistfully:

Oh, you bold head of mine!

How long will you stay on my shoulders?

Then he sat down and continued, "If I were in your place, I'd run away to Menzelinsk, and then to Osa and from Osa to Perm. And then I bet you wouldn't find me, my bright sparks! Now, hand over to me the command of the town and the front and I'll put everything right."

"I don't believe I've anything to be afraid of," I said.

Yerokhimov gave a meaningful whistle, "He's got nothing to be afraid of! Have you mobilized the horses? No, you have not. Have you got reservists from the local population? No, none at all. Have you levied a contribution on the town? No sign of it. Have you thrown counter-revolutionaries into gaol? Of course not. Have you found a single counter-revolutionary? Not one. And now tell me one last thing: have you had at least one priest or member of the merchant class shot? No, you certainly have not. Have you had the former district police officer shot? No you haven't done that either. And what about the former mayor of the town? Is he alive or dead? Alive. Well, there you are -- and you go on telling me you have nothing to be afraid of! It's a bad look out for you, my friend."

He got up and walked about the office, whistling again:

Oh, you bold head of mine!

How long will you stay on my shoulders?

He put his hands to his head, and while I calmly watched the cockroaches swarming on the warm wall near the stove, he began to run from window to window and then back to the door, still

with his hands on his head, moaning, "What's to be done, what's to be done? You're done for, my little love-bird. You'll lose that wild and wanton head of yours."

When he had been running about in this way for about five minutes, he sat down helplessly on a chair and said, "There's simply nothing to be done. If you could at least say that you have a full prison, that might be something. But who have you got there? No one. If you could at least show the inspectors that you'd set fire to some estate where the counter-revolutionaries had their hide-out, that might help. But you've nothing to show, nothing whatsoever. You haven't even made a house-search in the town. I tell you frankly, I'm fond of you but I've got a very low opinion of you."

He got up, strapped on his belt, thrust into it a revolver and a Caucasian sword half a metre long, shook my hand, and assured me that he wanted to help me—he didn't know how, but he would certainly hit on some way.

After his departure I telegraphed my reply to Simbirsk:

Number of prisoners being ascertained. Mobility of front and lack of maps prevent detailed account of victory at Bugulma. Inspectors will verify on spot. Encountering difficulties over publication of magazine in Tartar and Russian. No Tartar printers available. Short of Russian type. Whites took away printing presses. If air squadron established at Bugulma, leaflets with appeals to White Army can be dropped by aircraft. Meanwhile am stuck here without aircraft. Tver Revolutionary Regiment in reserve in town.

I slept the sleep of the just, and in the morning Yerokhimov came to me and said that he had thought up a way of saving me, and that he and his men had been working on it the whole night.

He took me outside the town to a former brick kiln where I found a picket from the 5th Company of the Tver Revolutionary Regiment, who stood there with fixed bayonets and, whenever anyone passed, shouted, "Keep to the left. No entry here."

In the middle of this place a small surprise awaited me—three graves, newly dug and covered over, and on each of them a stake with a notice-board. The first grave carried the following inscription:

Here lies buried the former district police inspector. He was shot in October 1918 as a counter-revolutionary.

On the second was written:

Here lies buried the priest. He was shot in October 1918 for counter-revolutionary activity.

And on the third:

Here lies buried the mayor of the town. He was shot for counter-revolutionary activity in October 1918.



My legs shook under me and, supported by Comrade Yerokhimov, I started to make my way back to the town.

"We got it all done in a single night," said Yerokhimov. "I promised I'd help you, so that you'd have something to show the inspectors when they come. For a long time I couldn't hit on anything suitable and then I suddenly thought of this. Would you like to see them?"

"Whom?" I asked in alarm.

"Why, the priest, the mayor, and the district police inspector, of course," said Yerokhimov. "I have them all locked up in the pig sty and when the inspection is over I'll let them go home. Don't imagine that anyone'll be any the wiser. No one's allowed near the graves. My brave lads know how to keep mum and when the inspectors arrive you'll have something to show for yourself."

I looked at his profile. His features reminded me of Potemkin's. And I went to see whether he was telling the truth. I soon satisfied myself that he had not been lying. From the pig sty there rang out the bass tones of the priest, singing very doleful psalms with the refrain: "Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy!"

And then I thought of "Potemkin's villages".

Difficulties with the prisoners

THE PETROGRAD CAVALRY REGIMENT UTTERLY DASHED ALL Comrade Yerokhimov's hopes. They not only failed to desert to the enemy, but even brought in prisoners — two squadrons of Bashkirs who had mutinied against their captain, Bakhivaleyev, and gone over to the Red Army. They had mutinied because he would not let them burn a village on their retreat. And so now they had decided to try their luck on the other side.

In addition to the Bashkirs the Petrograders brought in other prisoners, youths in peasant sandals, aged seventeen to nineteen, who had been mobilized by the Whites and had been watching for the first opportunity to make a bolt.

There were about three hundred of them, emaciated young men in tattered homespuns. Among them were Tartars, Mordvins, and Cheremisses, who knew as much about the significance of the civil war as they did about the solution of equations to the power of x .

They arrived in full military order with rifles and cartridges, and brought with them one of their colonels whom they drove in front of them. The old Tsarist colonel fairly bristled with rage and rolled his eyes wildly. Even though now a prisoner he could not resist repeating to his former subordinates, who led him like a bear on a rope, that they were "scum" and that he would smash their "snouts".

I gave orders for the prisoners to be billeted in an empty distillery and for half of them to be fed with rations from the Petrograd Cavalry and the other half with rations from the Tver Revolutionary Regiment. Shortly after I had issued this order, Comrade Yerokhimov and the Commander of the Petrograd Cavalry both came running up to me and insisted categorically that, as Commander of the Front and Commandant of the Town, I should feed the prisoners myself.

In the course of the conversation Comrade Yerokhimov expressed the view that rather than feed the prisoners who were to be his responsibility he would have them shot. The Commander of the Petrograd Cavalry kicked Comrade Yerokhimov in the shins and told him to stop talking nonsense. He would not allow anyone to shoot his prisoners—he could have done that at the front without waiting till now, after his cavalry had been sharing their bread and tobacco with them all this time. If he were to have anybody shot, it would only be that Colonel Makarov of the 54th Sterlitamat Regiment.

I demurred and said that all officers of the old Tsarist army, even when taken prisoner, were to be regarded as mobilized by the decree of June 16, 1918. Colonel Makarov would be sent to the Staff of the Eastern Front, where there were already a number of former Tsarist officers serving in the Staff itself.

Comrade Yerokhimov remarked that this was how counter-revolution got spread all over the Staffs of the Red Army. I explained to him that these people were under the control of the political organs and were being used purely as specialists. But Yerokhimov in his radicalism nearly burst into tears. "My little love-bird, I'm not asking you for anything else, but please give me that colonel!" And then he started to threaten. "You know very well that one of these days the inspectors will be coming here. What are they going to say to you? A colonel has fallen into our hands and been allowed to go away safe and sound! To hell with these decrees! Perhaps they were drawn up by specialists too."

The Commander of the Petrograd Cavalry suddenly got up and thundered at Yerokhimov, "Is Lenin a specialist? Answer, you

scoundrel! Are the Council of People's Commissars, who issue the decrees, specialists? My God, what a swine you are, you son of a bitch!"

He grabbed Yerokhimov by the collar, threw him out of the door, and went on raging: "Where was his regiment when we took Chishma and captured two squadrons of Bashkirs and a battalion of the 54th Sterlitamat Regiment with its colonel? Where was he hiding with his Tver Revolutionary Regiment? Where was he with his bandits, when Kapel's men and the Poles were only twenty-five versts from Bugulma? I'll take my cavalry and hound the whole of his glorious revolutionary regiment to the front. I'll have machine guns stationed behind them and force them to attack. Filthy scum!" He went on to swear horribly at Yerokhimov's mother and his regiment's mother, and only stopped when I pointed out that it was the Commander of the Front alone who had the right to station troops in that way, and then only on the authority of an order of the Supreme Staff.



So he reverted to what we had been talking about at the beginning, insisting that the maintenance of the prisoners in the town was the exclusive responsibility of the Commandant of the Town and the Commander of the Front. He was not going to pay a single kopek for them. He had in all only twelve thousand roubles in his regimental till and he had already sent to the field treasury three times for money without so far getting a single rouble.

I assured him that as Commandant of the Town and Commander of the Front I had only two roubles in my till, and if I reckoned up everything I owed that month to the various organizations which had furnished supplies to the units passing through the town, it would come to more than a million roubles. I was indeed sending the bills to the chief accountant in Simbirsk, as well as through the State Control Commission, but up to now none of them had been paid, so the balance of my month's stay here was: assets — two roubles, liabilities — more than a million. And, with such a magnificent turnover as this, for three days I had been drinking nothing but tea with milk and a small portion of white bread, morning, noon, and evening. I didn't have a single lump of sugar, I hadn't seen meat for over a week and I hadn't eaten *shchi* [cabbage soup] for over a fortnight. I could not even remember what butter or lard looked like.

At the description of such misery, tears came into the eyes of the Commander of the Petrograd Cavalry.

"Well, if it's as bad as that, I'll take over the feeding of all the prisoners. We have a great stock of provisions in our train. We managed to do a little looting in the enemy's rear," he said with obvious emotion. Then he asked me to give him the exact number of prisoners and went away. After his departure I got into direct communication with the Staff of the Eastern Front and exchanged a few telegrams with them, two on purely economic matters and one concerning the number of prisoners. I received the following answer:

Field Treasury has been instructed to advance you twelve million roubles. Enrol prisoners in army.

Bashkir squadrons should be incorporated in Petrograd Cavalry Regiment as independent unit, which you should complete with other Bashkir prisoners, to become first Soviet Bashkir Regiment. Captured battalion of 54th Sterlitamat Regiment should be incorporated in Tver Revolutionary Regiment. Distribute prisoners among companies of regiment. Send Colonel Makarov without delay to Staff of Eastern Front to be at their disposal. If he shows reluctance shoot him.

I sent for Comrade Yerokhimov and for the Commander of the Petrograd Cavalry.

Only the Commander of the Petrograd Cavalry came. Instead of Yerokhimov his regimental adjutant presented himself and informed me that Comrade Yerokhimov had just taken two armed soldiers with him and fetched Colonel Makarov out of the distillery where the prisoners were billeted. After that he had gone with him to the forest.

I rode after Yerokhimov and caught up with him, just as he was turning with his soldiers and the colonel into a low copse off the road to Little Bugulma.

"Where are you going?" I roared at him. Yerokhimov looked like a schoolboy, who has just been caught by the schoolmaster in his pear tree in the act of stuffing pears into his pocket.

For a moment he stared helplessly at the colonel, at the copse, at his soldiers, and at his boots, and then said diffidently, "I'm going for a stroll, just a little stroll into the forest with the colonel."

"Come on, now," I said. "I think you've been strolling long enough. You go on ahead and I'll go back with the colonel myself."

The infuriated colonel showed no sign of fear. I led my horse by the bridle and the colonel walked beside me.

"Colonel Makarov," I said, "I've just saved you from a disagreeable situation. Tomorrow I shall have you sent to Simbirsk, to the Staff. You are mobilized," I added affably.

Hardly had I finished speaking when the colonel struck me such a hefty blow across the temple with his enormous bear-like paw, that I dropped down without a sound in the snow by the path. I think that I should certainly have frozen to death if I had not been found a little later by two muzhiks, who were leaving Bugulma by sledge. They turned round and took me home.

The next day I crossed Colonel Makarov's name off the list of prisoners and the cavalry horse on which the colonel had escaped to get back to his Whites off the list of horses belonging to the Commandant of the Town. And it was just at that very moment that Comrade Yerokhimov, who had gone to Klyukven, was sending to the Revolutionary Army Council of the Eastern Front at Simbirsk the following telegram through the telegraph office of the railway station:

Comrade Gashek has released prisoner Colonel Makarov of 54th Sterlitamat Regiment and given him his own horse to enable him go over to enemy.

Yerokhimov

And this telegram actually reached Simbirsk. . . .

Before the Revolutionary Tribunal of the Eastern Front

“...böse Menschen haben keine Lieder” — “BAD PEOPLE HAVE NO SONGS” — a German poet wrote, as he completed his couplet. That evening I sang some Tartar songs so late into the night that no one around me could sleep or go peacefully to bed, from which I concluded that the German poet was lying.

All the same, I think I was the first of the whole neighbourhood to go to sleep, because I got finally tired myself of those monotonous tunes, which all end with “Ek, el, bar, ale, ele, bar, bar, bar”.

And then one of my Chuvashes woke me up to tell me that some sledges had arrived with three people who were showing their papers down at the guardhouse. His words, given in exact translation, were: “Three sledges, three people, down below heaps of papers, one, two, three papers.”

“Talk to you,” the Chuvash went on. “Bad people, swear!”

“Send them upstairs!”

Immediately afterwards the door flew open and the visitors pushed their way into my office-cum-bedroom.

The first was a fair-haired and bearded man, the second a woman wrapped in a fur coat, the third a man with a black moustache and an unusually penetrating look.

They introduced themselves one after the other. “I am Sorokin.” “I am Kalibanova.” “I am Agapov.”

The last named added harshly and relentlessly, "We are the Board of the Revolutionary Tribunal of the Eastern Front."

I offered them cigarettes, upon which Agapov made the observation: "I can see, Comrade Gashek, that you're not too badly off here. People who honestly serve the revolution can't afford tobacco of this quality."

When the samovar was brought in, we conversed about quite different matters. Sorokin spoke about literature and declared that, when he had been a Left Social Revolutionary, he had published in Petrograd a collection of poems under the title *Resistance*, but it was confiscated by the Press Commissariat. Today he had no regrets about that, because what he wrote had been utter drivel. He had studied modern philology and was now President of the Revolutionary Tribunal of the Eastern Front. He was a really gentle, nice man with a soft, blond full beard, which I tugged gently when we drank the tea.



Comrade Kalibanova was a student of medicine and had also once been a Left Social Revolutionary. She was a lively, nice little person, who knew the whole of Marx by heart. Agapov, the third member of the Revolutionary Tribunal, held the most radical views of the three. He had served as a clerk in the office of a Moscow lawyer, where the White Guard General Kaledin had once been in hiding. According to his description the lawyer was the biggest scoundrel in the world, because he had paid him only fifteen roubles a month — while he gave the waiter in the Hermitage, who brought him a portion of salmon, three times as much as that as a tip and only demanded in return the privilege of spitting in his face.

From Agapov's whole appearance it was clear that everything which had preceded the fall of Tsarism had turned him into a cruel, relentless, harsh, and terrible man, who had long ago settled his accounts with those who had paid him those wretched fifteen roubles, and who continued to wage war on those shades of the past wherever he came, transferring his suspicions to his surroundings and always thinking of some unknown traitors.

He spoke briefly, in curt sentences full of irony. When I invited him to take a lump of sugar in his tea, he said, "Life is only sweet for some people, Comrade Gashek, but it will also get bitter too."

When in the course of the conversation the subject of my being a Czech came up, Agapov observed, "However much you feed a wolf, he always looks towards the forest."

Comrade Sorokin replied as follows to Agapov's observation: "Everything will be explained in the course of the investigation."

Comrade Kalibanova said, with a sneer, "I think we should show Comrade Gashek our full powers."

I told them that it would give me pleasure if I could see whom I had the honour of dealing with, because I would certainly not allow anyone to wake me up in the night without serious cause.

And then Agapov opened his briefcase and showed me these full powers.

The Revolutionary Army Soviet
of the Staff of the Eastern Front

No. 728-b.

Simbirsk

Full powers

Are hereby accorded to A. Sorokin, Kalibanova, and Agapov who are appointed by the Revolutionary Soviet of the Staff of the Eastern Front as members of the Board of the Revolutionary Tribunal of the Eastern Front and are authorized to carry out investigations on the basis of their full powers with anybody anywhere: We order all military units to place at their disposal the number of men they require to carry out their sentences.

The Revolutionary Army Soviet
of the Staff of the Eastern Front
Signed:

"I think that's quite enough, Comrade Gashek," said Kalibanova.

"Of course it is," I agreed. "But take off your fur coat, because the samovar will be here in a moment, and besides it's warm here."

Agapov did not let slip the opportunity to ask, "And aren't you feeling warm? I think you may even be feeling hot."

"I've got a thermometer here," I said. "If you like, look by the window and you'll see that the temperature here is just normal."

Sorokin, the most solemn of them, took off his short fur coat and placed it on my bed, announcing that immediately after tea they would get down to business.

If I still remember Comrade Agapov today it is because I liked him for his frankness and openness.

He was also the first to ask me to have the samovar cleared away, as now the main proceedings against me would start. He said

that there was no need to call witnesses. The charge which had been worked out in Simbirsk on the basis of a telegram from Comrade Yerokhimov was quite sufficient. He had stated that I had set Colonel Makarov at liberty and given him my horse to enable him to go over to the enemy.

He proposed that this should be the end of the trial proceedings and demanded for me the sentence death by shooting, to be carried out within twelve hours.

I asked Comrade Sorokin, who actually was the President in charge of the trial proceedings. I received the reply that everything was in perfect order, because Agapov represented the prosecution.

Then I requested that Yerokhimov should be called, because any man might send a telegram in the first flush of anger. He should be heard orally as a witness.

Agapov stated that that was quite right, because if Yerokhimov had sent the telegram he obviously knew a great deal more about my affairs.

We agreed that Yerokhimov should be immediately summoned to give evidence about me.

I sent for Yerokhimov. . . .

He was half-asleep and very surly when he arrived. When Agapov informed him that what he saw before him was the Revolutionary Tribunal of the Eastern Front, which had been sent to investigate the case of Comrade Gashek on the spot and give its verdict, Yerokhimov's face assumed an expression of boundless idiocy.

He looked at me, and to this day it is a psychological enigma what was going on inside him.

He looked from one member of the Revolutionary Tribunal to the other and finally at me.

I gave him a cigarette and said, "Have a smoke, Comrade Yerokhimov. It's the same good tobacco we smoked together that time."

Yerokhimov once again eyed the whole gathering stupidly and hopelessly and said, "My little love-birds, I sent that telegram when I was completely sozzled."

Comrade Sorokin then stood up and delivered a lecture on the green serpent of alcoholism.

Next, Kalibanova spoke in the same sense, and finally Agapov stood up and in an upsurge of indignation demanded severe punishment for Yerokhimov for drunkenness, because he had committed that crime while he was commander of the Tver Revolutionary Regiment.

Agapov, beautiful in his enthusiasm, proposed sentence of death by shooting.

I stood up and said that not a living soul could be found to shoot Yerokhimov. It would start a mutiny in the army.

Kalibanova proposed twenty years' forced labour, Sorokin that he should be reduced to the ranks.

They talked at length for and against every motion until the small hours, with the final result that Yerokhimov received a severe reprimand, coupled with the warning that if it was repeated the most severe penalty would be applied against him.

During the whole proceedings he was fast asleep.

In the morning, the Revolutionary Tribunal of the Eastern Front departed and, when Agapov took leave of me, he said once more, ironically, "However much you feed a wolf, he always looks towards the forest. Keep your eyes open, brother, otherwise it'll be 'off with your head!'" I shook hands with all of them. . . .