

# White Terror

Cossack Warlords of the  
Trans-Siberian

Jamie Bisher

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## WHITE TERROR

In the last days of 1917, a fugitive Mongol-Cossack captain bravely led seven cohorts into a mutinous garrison at Manchuli, a roughneck bordertown on Russia's frontier with Manchuria. The garrison had gone Red, revolted against its officers, and become a dangerous, ill-disciplined mob. Nevertheless, Captain Grigorii Semenov cleverly convinced the garrison to lay down its arms and board a train back into Bolshevik territory. Through such brash action, Semenov and a handful of Cossack brethren established themselves as the warlords of the Russian Far East.

Like inland pirates, they menaced the Trans-Siberian Railway with fleets of armored trains, Cossack cavalry, mercenaries and pressgang cannon fodder. They undermined Admiral Kolchak's White government, ruthlessly liquidated all Reds, terrorized the population, prostituted themselves to the Japanese Army, antagonized the American Expeditionary Force and Czechoslovak Legion and orchestrated the frenzied last spasms of the Russian Empire's *Götterdämmerung*. Historians have long recognized that Ataman Semenov and company were a nasty lot. This book details precisely how nasty they were.

White Terror describes the major events and trends during this dark era when Siberia became hell on earth. It offers a taste of daily life in the *atamanshchina*—the realms of Atamans Semenov and Kalmykov, and depicts the byzantine web of relationships and conflicts in a desolate land that suddenly teemed with warlords, revolutionaries, counterrevolutionaries, refugees, prisoners, foreign troops and relief workers, while describing the ever-changing orders of battle, key officers and armored trains. It is the story of a forgotten Russia in turmoil, when the line between government and organized crime blurred into a chaotic continuum of kleptocracy, vengeance and sadism.

**Jamie Bisher** is a graduate of the United States Air Force Academy with a masters degree from the University of Maryland and more than 25 years experience in international security programmes. His fascination with Russia's revolution dates back to his first childhood visit to the Soviet Embassy in Washington in 1968.

WHITE TERROR



COSSACK WARLORDS  
OF THE TRANS-SIBERIAN

by Jamie Bisher



ПРИКАЗЪ

Генералъ - Лейтенантъ Атамана Сомерова И.  
командующему Войсками Иркутскаго Военнаго  
Округа.

Иркутскъ, 1919 г.

# WHITE TERROR

Cossack warlords of the Trans-Siberian

*Jamie Bisher*



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TO PALOMA, BULLY, BUTTERCUP AND DADDY

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## ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

1LT	First lieutenant
2LT	Second lieutenant
ADM	Admiral
AEFS	American Expeditionary Forces Siberia
Agitprop	Agitation and propaganda
AP	Associated Press
ARC	American Red Cross
ASMPR	Academy of Sciences—Mongolian People's Republic
ASTP	Army Specialized Training Program
BREM	<i>Byuro po Delam Rossiiskikh Emigrantov</i> , Bureau for the Affairs of Russian Emigrants
Britmis	British Military Mission in Siberia
CAPT	Captain
CBMO	Central Bureau of Military Organizations
CER	Chinese Eastern Railway
COL	Colonel
CSEF	Canadian Siberian Expeditionary Force
<i>Dal'buvo</i>	<i>Dal'nevostochnoe Buro</i> , Far Eastern Bureau (Russian Communist Party)
DMI	Director of Military Intelligence
DVSV	<i>Dal'nevostochnyi Soyuz Voennykh</i> , Far Eastern Union of Servicemen
ESC	Eastern Siberian Commissariat, anti-Bolshevik resistance organization based in Harbin
FER	Far Eastern Republic
FO	Foreign Office
<i>FRUS</i>	<i>Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States</i>
FSB	<i>Federal' naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti</i> , Federal Security Service, the successor to the KGB
GEN	General
<i>Gospolokhrana</i>	<i>Gosudarstvenaya Politicheskaya Okhrana</i> , State Political Police of the FER
gulag	Slang for Soviet labor camp network, from <i>G(lavnoe) upravlenie ispravitel'no-trudovkh) lag(ere)</i> . Chief

	Administration (of Correctional Labor) Camps
GVO	<i>Gosudarstvennaya Vnutrennaya Okhrana</i> , Mongolian State Internal Security
HQ	Headquarters
IARC	Inter-Allied Railway Committee
IATB	Inter-Allied Technical Board
LT	Lieutenant
LTC	Lieutenant Colonel
MAJ	Major
MGB	<i>Ministerstvo Gosudarst' vennoi Bezopasnosti</i> , Ministry of State Security
MID	Military Intelligence Division
MILREVKOM	Military-Revolutionary Committee
MPP	Mongolian People's Party
MVD	<i>Ministerstva Vnutrennikh Del</i> , Ministry of Internal Affairs
n.d.	No date
n.p.	No place of publication given
NARA	National Archives and Records Administration
NCO	Noncommissioned officer
NKVD	<i>Narodnyi Kommisariat Vnutrennikh Del</i> , People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs
ObRevKom	<i>Oblast Revolyutsionnyi Komitet</i> , Regional Revolutionary Committee
OGPU	<i>Obedinennoe Gosudarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravleniye</i> , All-Union State Political Board
OKO	<i>Osobii Kazach'ii Otryad</i> , Special Cossack Detachment
OMO	<i>Osobii Manchzhurskii Otryad</i> , Special Manchurian Detachment
ONI	Office of Naval Intelligence (USA)
OSS	Office of Strategic Services (USA)
PGAS	Provisional Government of Autonomous Siberia ('[Petr] Derber Government', January–September 1918)
POW	Prisoner of war
PREDREVOYENSOVIET	<i>Predsedatel' Revolyutsionnogo Voenogo Soviet</i> , President of Revolutionary Military Soviet
Pri-Amur	<i>Primorskaya</i> (Maritime) and Amur Provinces
PSG	Provisional Siberian Government ('Omsk Government', June-November 1918)
QM	Quartermaster

RG	Record Group
RGIADV	<i>Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv Dal'nego Vostoka</i> , Russian State Historical Archives of the Far East
ROA	<i>Russkaya Osvoditel'naya Armiya</i> , Russian Liberation Army
ROVS	<i>Russkii Obshche-voinskii Soyuz</i> , Russian All-Military Union
RRSC	Russian Railway Service Corps
RSFSR	Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic
RTA	Russian Telegraphic Agency
SGT	sergeant
SKDV	<i>Soyuz Kazakovna Dal'nem Vostoke</i> , Union of Cossacks in the Far East
SMERSH	' <i>Smert 'Shpioni!</i> ' Soviet counterintelligence units during the Second World War
SOVDEP	Soviet of Cossacks', Workers', Peasants' and Soldiers' Deputies
SR	Socialist-Revolutionary
UKGB	<i>Upravlenie Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti</i> , Administration of the Committee of State Security
UMVD	<i>Upravlenie Ministerstva Vnutrennich Del</i> , Administration of the Ministry of Internal Affairs
UNKVD	<i>Upravlenie Narodnyi Kommissariat Vnutrennikh Del</i> , Administration of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs
USAT	US Army Transport
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WIA	wounded in action
WSC	Western Siberian Commissariat, anti-Bolshevik resistance organization based in Novonikolaevsk
YMCA	Young Mens' Christian Association

## PREFACE

Historians have long known that the Cossack warlords of Russia's civil war era were a nasty lot, but no one seems to have assembled a coherent and accurate picture of them. They are often relegated to the footnotes of Russian revolutionary history, even though they set the stage for many crucial turning points when they themselves were not at the forefront of history-making events, as they were in 1918 and from 1920 until 1922. This book aims to describe the Cossack warlords by their actions, words and the impressions on those around them, to flesh out their role in the Russian Civil War, to dispel common rumors and disinformation, and to place the conflict in the Russian Far East in strategic perspective.

This book focuses on the infamous warlords that operated along the Trans-Siberian Railway in the vast expanse between Irkutsk at the southwest corner of Lake Baikal and Vladivostok on the Pacific coast: Transbaikal Cossack Ataman Grigorii Mikhailovich Semenov, Ussuri Cossack Ataman Ivan Pavlovich Kalmykov and Baron Roman Ungern-Shternberg. They stepped into Russia's revolutionary arena as young war heroes, appalled by the Reds' destruction of traditional institutions, incitement of class hatred, brutality and anarchy. They boldly raised the White banner of counterrevolution when most generals and politicians had retreated in confusion into exile. There ended their positive contributions to modern Russia.

The Cossack warlords actively undermined Admiral Aleksandr Kolchak's government and military until its collapse in autumn 1919, although the admiral's fiery temper and tactlessness salted the Whites' self-inflicted wounds almost as much as Japanese treachery and manipulation of Tokyo's pliable protégés, Semenov, Kalmykov and Ungern-Shternberg. The Cossack warlords' sadism and avarice caused Western powers to accept the vicious Bolsheviks as the inevitable lesser of two evils, and the warlords' legacy branded White refugees as reactionary suspects or even *persona non grata* during the post-war Diaspora. Ungern-Shternberg and Semenov managed to discredit not only Russia's White movement but the Pan-Mongol unification movement as well.

Blinded by his hatred of revolutionaries, the sparkle of loot and the intoxicating taste of absolute power, Semenov survived the Red onslaught to undermine Russia's eleventh-hour White governments and to entrust Russia's riches to her conniving enemies. As if this miserable legacy was not black enough, Semenov ungratefully undermined law and order in his Manchurian refuge, becoming a kingpin in one of the century's most diabolical criminal enterprises, the extortion, prostitution and narcotics syndicate run by Japanese intelligence and the Kwantung Army. This racketeering paved the way for the 1931 invasion and enslavement of Manchuria, which eventually contributed to the emasculation of the League of Nations and set the stage for the Second World War. In contrast to his vile accomplishments, Semenov was, according to those who knew him, intelligent, brave, personable, a sadist who was a warm, loving father, a womanizer who was kind to all his wives and mistresses, a pirate who was generous with his purloined treasure.

## Sources

The primary source material for this book—indeed, its impetus—includes memoranda, reports and a variety of other documents written on the spot by people who had to work alongside the armies of the Cossack warlords. Most of these documents now reside in the National Archives record groups for the US Army American Expeditionary Force—Siberia, the US War Department's Military Intelligence Division, the US Office of Naval Intelligence, and the US Department of State's Russian Railway Service Corps. Many documents had never before been declassified or examined by an outsider. Most were not written by desk-bound bureaucrats in Washington, but by engineers, soldiers and humanitarian aid-givers from many nations. These records also included telegram and cable traffic from the lines running alongside the Trans-Siberian and Chinese Eastern Railways, communications which conveyed the drama, excitement, fear and confusion of the moment. The old files also contained a wealth of valuable newspaper summaries from *Dalekaya Okraina*, *Primorskaya Zhizn*, *Novosti Zhizn*, *Sibirskii Put'*, *Osaka Mainichi* and other newspapers, with translations and analysis of the articles by in-country intelligence analysts. Some recently released Russian archival material was also obtained, but the author relied more upon recent books and papers published by many industrious Russian researchers who have enjoyed the access and time to pore through the old files of the intelligence services and regional archives, in particular V.I.Vasilevskii's extensive compilation of documents pertaining to Ataman Semenov.

Other sources poured into this book include the synthesized research of Russian and Western writers: Smele, Morley, Fleming, Snow, Dotsenko, Dvornichenko, Borisov, Shereshevskii, Gutman, Ablova, Manusevich, Shishkin and scores of others; and memoirs of eye-witnesses: Ataman Semenov, US Major General Graves, doughboy Jesse Anderson, Czechoslovak legionnaire Henry Baerlein, Canadian Captain James M.Bell, General Baron Aleksei Budberg, socialist revolutionary Paul Dotsenko, Polish prisoner of war Roman Dyboski, Polish refugee Ferdinand Ossendowski, Dutch journalist Lokewijk-Hermen Grondijs, YMCA secretaries Edward Heald and the Reitzels, British Colonel John Ward, Manchurian intelligence officer Amleto Vespa, *et al.*

### Geography, language, political labels, ranks and dates

Note that geographic references to western Siberia refer to everything west of the River Ob, references to eastern Siberia refer to territory between the River Ob and Lake Baikal, the Russian Far East includes everything east of Baikal. Anglicized, pre-revolutionary provincial names are used, for example, Transbaikal, Amur and Maritime Provinces.

A standard scheme of transliteration and romanization of Russian terms and names is adhered to, which, to the author's annoyance, results in mispronunciation by readers who have not studied the Russian language, making no distinction between the Russian *e* and *ě*, for instance. Thus 'Semenov' is normally used, even if original documents cited him as 'Semionov', 'Semenoff', or any of the other many variations. However, there are some necessary exceptions dictated by common usage or quotes from other citations, for instance: Bolshevik versus *Bol'shevik*, soviet versus *sovet*, Alioshin (as cited by Peter Hopkirk) versus Aleshin, Harbin instead of Kharbin, and Horvath instead of Khorvat.

Also, foreign language terms are italicized except for those which have come into common usage in English, like *Bolshevik* and *soviet*.

Note that the term 'Red' evolves with the ambiguous White and Allied usage of the term, which sometimes (but not always) included most rank-and-file Socialist-Revolutionaries (SRs) in the Russian Far East until about January 1920, although many SRs—notably Colonel A.A.Krakovetskii—served with the Whites for the duration of the civil war. Similarly, the 'Bolshevik' label was often generously applied to include not only all members of the Russian Social-Democrat Labor Party (including Mensheviks), as Lenin's party was formally known in its early years, but everyone who supported party endeavors, and the term continued in use after the March 1918 introduction of the 'Communist' brand.

The author made an effort to state participants' military ranks in Russian because of differences between Russian Army and Cossack rank titles and additional officer ranks that are not present in Western militaries, and also because of the unusual and confusing new rank titles of the revolutionary forces.

Japanese names are presented unadulterated (i.e. last name first).

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin changed Russia from the Julian Calendar to the Gregorian on 1 February 1918, adding 13 days to Julian dates. This is especially confusing during the threshold period of autumn 1917–spring 1918, although an effort has been made to cite new calendar dates during these months.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# 1

## PRELUDE TO TERROR

Creation–November 1917

‘The history of little Chita was the history of all Russia.’  
(Prince Petr A.Kropotkin)

### **Battleground of the Gods**

Long before Siberia’s forests echoed with the ringing swords of Mongols, Tatars, Cossacks, Reds and Whites and the cries of their victims, the land was terrorized by vicious flying serpents, gigantic snarling canines, invisible evil spirits called *shalmos*, and multi-headed beasts called *mangathais*—according to the myths of the Buryat Mongols. These creatures fought constantly for territory and for power over the Marat, the people who inhabited the world that preceded our world. Boundaries between the natural and supernatural blurred in the old world where even mortal Marat transformed into supernatural wolves, ravens and swans. Buryat myths spin a relentless and confusing web of sacrifice, politicking, deceit and betrayal, punctuated by vicious atrocities traded by forces of both good and evil. Siblings turned against siblings and, motivated by self-preservation, thirst for power or revenge, men even cut deals with *mangathais*, who were usually busy boiling, impaling or disemboweling people.

It was not an idyllic world. In one case, a deformed, frog-faced infant with supernatural powers lured enemies close enough to rip out their tongues and bludgeon them to death. In another, the World White God, Esege Malan, found it necessary to spy on his own earthly emissary’s activities and attitudes. Esege Malan created the world, but could not even control his own human sons, much less the plethora of other hideous creatures running amok over the land. Evil and disorder reigned. At one point so much carnage smothered the earth that Esege Malan created flies and maggots to clean up the blanket of putrefying bodies. Epic battles raged for days and nights on end. Gargantuan combatants gouged out hills and gorges with their slashing claws and hooves, hammered out valleys where they tumbled, and pitched immense projectiles that became rocky outcrops and landmarks for the ensuing centuries of warriors, rebels and pirates.<sup>1</sup>

Epic struggle cast its shadow across the Transbaikal plateau again between 1917 and 1921, when Reds and Whites fought ferociously for the souls of humanity. Infernal flying machines hurled fire from the sky, and giant belching locomotives roared like *mangathais* and pitched projectiles that tore shelters asunder and shredded people into fodder for wolves and crows. Assassins and spies lurked in the shade, modern *shalmos* wreaking doom upon mortal enemies. The stench of mass graves and burning flesh, rivers swollen with corpses, screams of the tortured and raucous hilarity of sadists raping, mutilating and tormenting, reveling in quarterings, hangings, whippings, brandings,

beheadings and multitudinous methods of slaughter—the horrors of Buryat mythology had come to pass in Verkhne-Udinsk, Chita and hundreds of satellite villages and settlements hugging the Transbaikal plateau, nestled in river valleys, buried in the green taiga, or perched above Lake Baikal.

This modern pestilence was ordained by Russia's conquest of Siberia and the shifting fault lines of Russo-Japanese tensions. The background of the civil war in Russia's Far East was shaped by its history as the cradle of Mongol culture, a land of freedom and opportunity for Cossacks, runaways, fugitives and the oppressed, and a land of exile for troublemakers and criminals. An irregular flow of people, commerce and ideas, moving in and out along Siberia's interlaced rivers, the Great Post Road and the Tea Road, kept the region in ferment and conversely swayed events in distant parts of Asia, Europe and even America.

The White Terror that extinguished so many lives was shaped by a frontier society, where the cultural chemistry of Buryats, Evenks, Russians, Old Believers, Poles, Koreans, Chinese and other societies fused to spawn a culture of endemic violence. Cossack society and tradition, as altered and practiced by the isolated and relatively young institutions in the Russian Far East, overlaid this complex embroidery and set the stage for warlords and banditry.

Siberia is immense enough to be the gods' battleground. The swamps and plains of western and central Siberia engulf an area as wide as Australia and the Russian Far East lies as far from the Urals as Newfoundland is from Britain. Russia's Far East rears up like a *mangathai* from the eastern tendrils of the Altai mountains and the basin of the Lena river to nestle Lake Baikal between jagged alpine peaks of the Sayan mountains. From this confluence of alps around Baikal, interlocking spines of mountain ranges—the Yablonovii, Borshchovochnii, Udokan and Stanovoi, among others—fan out east from the lake to collect water for the Lena river's long journey to the Laptev Sea in the frozen north.

No less than a quarter of a million years ago, our world supplanted the mythological world of the Marat. Some early human clans were hardy and advanced enough to settle and thrive in the Altai mountains and even in the Arctic tundra during the Upper Paleolithic period more than 35,000 years ago. By the modern era, Siberia was the home of more than 30 indigenous ethnic groups of diverse origins, but classified linguistically as mostly Turkic, Manchu-Tungus, Finno-Ugric and Mongolic. Newcomers tended to enter Siberia from central Asia, forsaking the steppes for the richer, yet colder forests of the north. The memories of some groups' ancient migration treks from central Asia still survive in folklore.

The rich forests and waters of the Baikal region fostered cultural development. Formal burial sites around the lake evince rituals that date back 8,000 years. Paleolithic tribes such as the Mal'ta scattered carvings of birds, deer and women in mammoth ivory, bone and antler across an area from west of Lake Baikal to the Amur basin. Prehistoric clans of the Evenki clustered in Transbaikal, the region east of Lake Baikal, before scattering across the taiga to the Pacific coast and as far west as the Yenisei river.<sup>2</sup>

Nomadic tribes that would eventually become known as the Mongols had settled along Baikal's shore and in valleys south of the lake by 500 AD. They flourished along the Selenga, Kherlen and Onon rivers. Mongols came to be defined more by geography, language and way of life than by racial characteristics. By the eleventh century, they

comprised a number of fractious clans of nomadic herdsmen vying with each other for the sparse grasslands bounded by the Altai and Tian Shan mountains in the west, the Great Khingan mountains in the east and the Gobi desert in the south. They were loosely bound by a common spiritual tradition of animist beliefs, where shamans interpreted dreams, visions, omens and natural signs of the many good and bad spirits lurking in the water, ground, air, fire and other dimensions. In the life-or-death competition for livestock, water and pastures, individuals perfected the arts of horsemanship and hunting, tent-living and frequent moves. These skills were also valuable in coping with the ceaseless drama of feuds between tribes, clans and families. In contrast to settled communities where men wielded agricultural and construction implements, Mongol men mastered the lasso, dagger, saber, battle-axe, mace, javelin, hooked lance, bow and arrow. Likewise, constant competition and conflict honed clan leaders' expertise in shrewd negotiation, spying and tactical thinking.

The heartland of Mongolian peoples is the Lake Baikal basin, *Barguzin Tukum* to the ancient Buryats. In Buryat mythology these kinsmen were known as *Burte Chino*—the Blue Wolf People. 'The Buryats have characteristic Mongol features', wrote one European adventurer, 'but they are taller and more strongly built than the tribes met further east and have much more energy of character.' This energy shone in all aspects of their rich and ancient culture. Even long after firearms came into popular use, mounted Buryats hunted wolves with bow and arrow, running down and shooting their formidable prey at full gallop. Temujin, the most famous of Mongols, was said to have been descended from the Blue Wolf clan.<sup>3</sup>

At a site on the Onon river in 1206, a *khuriltai*, an assembly of Mongol tribal leaders, pronounced the great warrior Temujin as Ghengis Khan, the Lord of the Earth.<sup>4</sup> As a boy Temujin learned life's harshest lessons on a desolate stretch of the Onon after Yesugei, his respected father, was poisoned and his family cast out of their clan to subsist on berries and occasional bits of marmot and dormice. The 1206 *khuriltai* culminated Temujin's struggle for his family's survival and revenge against the Mongols who betrayed them. The event also forged Mongolian national identity and Temujin's subsequent brutal and brilliant campaigns fortified it. Ghengis Khan's first campaign was to unite—by the sword—all Mongol tribes by attacking the last hold-outs not under his control, the Urianhai and Merkit. His second major campaign set out to pillage, plunder and subjugate China's Jin empire. In May 1215, the Mongol army razed the opulent Jin capital at Zhongdu (Beijing), and then, during the next 12 years, swarmed over central Asia and the Caucasus like locusts, ravaging its rich erudite cities, driven by lust for battle, power, flesh and immediate pilferageable loot, although some modern writers insist that Genghis Khan also possessed some spiritual motivation for the apocalypse he wrought.

The entire Mongol nation, estimated at between 700,000 and 3 million people, mobilized for predatory warfare and the bacchanalia that followed. Women followed the armies onto the battlefields to slit the throats of enemy wounded while children darted about the corpses retrieving arrowheads to launch against the next unfortunate foe. Military units were structured on the decimal system so that no commander had to give orders to more than ten men. The building block of the huge Mongol armies was the *arban* and *bagatur*—a ten-man squad and its leader, which could be rapidly deployed in a ten-*arban* squadron—the *jagun*, then as a ten-*jagun* regiment—the *minghan*, and on so

forth up to 10,000-man divisions. Captured technologies—catapults, giant crossbows, gunpowder, incendiaries, combat engineering and psychological warfare techniques, to name but a few—were expertly exploited and applied in battle.

After Ghengis Khan died in August 1227, the Mongol whirlwind raged for two more generations. The bloody tide of the Mongol invasion ebbed at the gates of Vienna in December 1241, halted not by defeat, but by the death of the current khan, Temujin's grandson Ogedei. The army of another grandson, Mongke, penetrated as far west as Ain Jalut, Palestine in September 1260, before his death and a powerful Mameluke army deflated its vigor. Within two centuries of Temujin's triumphant 1206 *khuriltai* on the Onon river, successors to Mongol rule who had not assimilated into local societies lapsed into squabbles, debauchery and irrelevance. In the Mongols' 'glorious slaughter' and sacking of Samarkand, Bukhara, Herat and other central Asian cities, they abruptly halted development and reshaped the landscape with the massive heaps of their victims' bones. In western and central Siberia, their empire dissolved into a number of Turkified khanates and by the fourteenth century the region was labeled Tataria on Italian maps, Sibir in Arabic chronicles, the origins of both names being obscured by time. Mongol territory quickly receded back to the heartland between Lake Baikal and a rising Manchuria, and the yak-tail banner became a symbol of barbarity and sadism. Yet, in Mongol folklore, Genghis Khan became a national icon.

By 1580, when the bellwether Cossack expedition under Yermak Timofeyevich marched into Siberia, the land was still predominately inhabited by numerous clans of pastoral nomads and hunter-gatherers. Tatar khans, Turkic heirs to Mongol power, still ruled large patches of western and central Siberia, although the growth of the Muscovy principality into a Russian power center was eroding Tatar territory. After the Russian conquest of the khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan in 1552 and 1554, the borders of the White Tsar (then Ivan IV, 'the Terrible') were pressing against the Ural mountains and Caspian Sea to the east and a strong Polish kingdom and Crimean khanate to the west and south. Along the periphery of Tsar Ivan's kingdom lived communities of iniquitous pirates, renegades, fugitives from cruel and arbitrary laws and runaways from vassalage, the flotsam of scores of different tribes and cultures, predominately Orthodox Christians, known as the Cossacks.

Yermak was a Cossack warrior originally hired and outfitted with modern firearms by the Stroganov family, rich salt-merchants on the Kama river, to defend its property. With the Tsar's blessing, Yermak led a band of Volga Cossacks as far as the Irtysh river, defeating numerically superior detachments of the Tatar khanate of Sibir in several battles along the way. His small force captured Tyumen and Khan Kuchum's capital, Kashlyk, before Yermak drowned in battle in about 1585, pulled under the Irtysh by a suit of heavy chainmail bestowed upon him by the Tsar. Yermak's legend spread quickly, advertising the vulnerability of the vast lands to the east, rich with furs. The seeds of Cossack conquest for God and Tsar had been planted.

Expansion into Siberia handed the Tsar an opportunity to simultaneously employ Russia's restless Cossacks against the troublesome Tatars on his eastern frontier and to tap into the treasures of Siberia's forests. The push to the east would offer the added benefits of siphoning off Cossacks away from the burgeoning frontier of Russian commerce and population where they engaged in banditry and inspired disobedience and disperse the explosive concentrations of troublemakers in the Volga and Don river basin

*voiskos* (hosts), the unruly communities that were swelling with runaway serfs and tax-dodgers. Siberia provided the pressure-relief that made it possible for Russia's property-owning elite to tighten the screws upon the peasantry, institutionalizing feudal relationships by indenturing serfs to land and landowner, and constantly increasing the tax burden.

Thus, Cossacks, trappers and traders bore into Siberia's forests in search of freedom as much wealth from furs. Allured by the scent of new revenue, the Tsar began dispatching settlers and exiles to reinforce the territorial gains of the Cossack vanguard within ten years of Yermak's first expedition. Throughout the seventeenth century, the oppression of Russian and Polish governors, nobles, priests and bureaucrats enkindled violent upheaval among the Cossacks. Cossack aversion to authority and the grind of feudal life drove them east into the forests, despite Siberia's threats of scurvy, starvation, frostbite, snow-blindness and hostile natives. Some Cossacks exchanged the uncertain life of trader or robber for service as garrison soldiers or government agents (*prikazchiki*)—service Cossacks, the backbone of Russian imperial expansion. Service Cossacks were paid in cash, grain, salt or sometimes land and titles, however Siberia often extracted payment of its own in misery, blood, sanity and life.

As Cossack camps evolved into settlements and then towns, attracting colonists and meddling Russian administrators, Cossacks drove deeper into Siberia to escape the stifling influence of the latter. Within 60 years of Yermak's expedition, Cossacks had swarmed over the 4,000 miles of Siberian wilderness between the Urals and the Pacific. The steady march across Siberia left a string of fortified settlements at strategic, defensible sites along major rivers: Tyumen in 1585, Tomsk in 1604, Krasnoyarsk in 1628, with dozens of *zimov'e*, small cabin outposts, to collect the *yasak*, in between. In 1689 the Russian-Chinese Treaty of Nerchinsk halted the Cossack advance at the Amur river, the natural boundary between Siberia's forests and the Manchurian badlands. By the middle of the eighteenth century, armies of China's Qing dynasty coincidentally removed the biggest threats to Russia's vulnerable chain of outposts by defeating the Kalmyk and Kyrgyz princes of the Turkestan steppes. Offshoots from the Mongol family tree, they had refused to pay the *yasak*—an age-old tribute paid in furs and commanded formidable nomad cavalry that proved lethal to the small Cossack detachments.

Of course, Siberia was not unoccupied, virgin territory, and the inhabitants were not eager to share the forests and waters with the newcomers. Cossacks became adept at pitting tribes against each other, a task made easier by generations of squabbling over hunting and fishing rights. They made alliances with many tribes, took hostages when expedient, instituted loyalty oaths, and, to the tsar's delight, collected the *yasak*. There were fierce battles between combatants, enslavement of natives, forced labor, smallpox outbreaks among isolated clans in the far north, and incidences of mass murder of locals and cannibalism among stranded, starving Cossack detachments. Their tiny parasitic colonies were precarious footholds in a vast green sea brimming with hostile inhabitants. Cossack survival relied upon pacts with local chiefs and the loyalty of local mercenaries as much as it did on imported foods.

An expedition under Yakov Khripunov brought Russian encroachment to Buryat Mongol territory in 1622, but the Buryats would not willingly submit to Russian rule for another 80 years even though they were eager to trade. Khripunov dispatched a Cossack envoy named Kozlov to invite the natives to become Russian subjects. Apparently the

Buryats refused the offer, because in 1627 an expedition under one Perfilyev set out to unsuccessfully extort tribute from the Buryats.<sup>5</sup> Yet another expedition, led by explorer Piotr Beketov, was attempted the next year, but, for the time being, the Russians sidestepped the Buryats and continued east up the Angara river, then the Ilim, then the Lena to establish Fort Yakutsk in 1632. Six years later, the Altyn Khan, who ruled from Lake Ubsa in northwestern Mongolia, warmly received a Russian envoy, yet opposition to the invaders from the West continued.<sup>6</sup> Resistance faltered in 1643, when Cossacks broke the Buryat siege of a Russian fort at Verkholsensk near Lake Baikal's western shore, ransacked local villages and crossed the lake to squeeze tribute from Buryats on the Irkut river. The following year, a Russian expedition was allowed to visit the Setsen Khan's capital, Urga, on the Mongolian plateau and shortly thereafter the Setsen Khan sent an emissary to Moscow, formally launching a cautious courtship with Russia. Sometime during these years of tension, shamans noted that when a great forest fire destroyed an expanse of dusky pines, white-barked birch trees grew out of the ashes, an omen that Russians would supplant the Buryats. Thus, perhaps it was inevitable that in 1648 Barguzin was founded on Lake Baikal's eastern shore 'as a place to receive tribute from the Buryats'.<sup>7</sup> Uprisings against the Russians occurred in 1650, 1695 and 1696, but in a few short years the Buryats agreed to a Russian protectorate to avoid Manchu rule by an expanding Qing dynasty in China. The first 60 families of Russian colonists settled in Buryat country at Fort Balazansk in 1653. Nevertheless, Buryat *taishas* (chiefs) maintained some authority until the twentieth century, although this arrangement did not prevent Russian expropriation of lands for distribution to settlers and exiles.

Despite all of their freedom-loving discourse, the Cossacks were no less brutal than Spain's *conquistadores* in the Americas and they eagerly became the bloody instruments of 'ruthless colonial exploitation'.<sup>8</sup> Armed resistance against the Russian conquest begat slaughters by both invaders and the original inhabitants, but the worst cases led to genocide of indigenous groups such as the Dauri people on the Amur river, who were hunted down and butchered during campaigns by Vasili Poyarkov about 1645 and Yerofei Khabarov in 1650. Cossack settlers in Kamchatka so exploited and ravaged the natives that wholesale murder, massacres and waves of suicides reduced the indigenous population from 20,000 to 8,000 in the first five decades of the Russian conquest.

The Cossacks were a remote threat to the Khalka Mongols who lived in the region that is now modern Mongolia. A Dzungar Mongol army under Galdan Khan was pressuring them from the west in an effort to conquer and reunify the entire Mongol nation. In desperation the Khalka appealed to the Manchus for assistance, who routed Galdan's army with modern artillery then, in May 1691, summoned major Khalka chiefs to a *khuriltai* at which the Qing monarch, Kangxi, received their pledges of loyalty in return for his protection. The Khalka lands furnished Kangxi with a buffer against Russian expansion and a base for offensive operations against the Cossacks.

North of the Khalka lands, the Buryats and Evenki were preyed upon by Khalka raiders who stole cattle and horses, and drew closer to the Russians for security. In 1727 China and Russia agreed upon a line between east and west that roughly shadowed the boundary between Evenki and Buryat territory to the north and Peking's Khalka vassals to the south. On the Russian side of the line Evenki and Buryat clans living near the delineating rivers and 63 stone border posts were employed to guard the border in exchange for some enticing privileges. Evenki, for example, received lances from the

Cossacks, exemption from paying tribute and 6 rubles per year. In 1772, Cossacks were ordered to homestead along the border and soon lived alongside Evenki and Buryat families in budding villages.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1760s construction of the Great Siberian Post Road, the *trakt* linking Moscow to Yakutsk, facilitated migration, communications and supply to settlements, so that by the end of the century approximately 1.6 million Russians were scattered across Siberia. All who ventured into the depths of Siberia, from nobles to convicts, shared the *trakt*, the single artery that bore into the green frontier. They all experienced Siberia's physical sense of loneliness and desolation, the monotony of the endless taiga, the claustrophobia between the morose walls of pine and cedar that seemed ready to smother the *trakt* in verdant boughs. As travelers penetrated deeper into central and eastern Siberia, they felt the palpable vastness—a thousand miles between cities (for example, Tomsk-Irkutsk), hundreds of miles between towns, and 15–20 miles between post stations, the sturdy cabins where travelers exchanged horses, drank tea and passed on news.<sup>10</sup> Travelers with means rode in a *tarantass*, a notoriously uncomfortable carriage where the rhythmic plod of horses' hooves, muffled crunch of the vehicle's four wheels on roadbed and incessant vibration that jarred every bone and organ might mercifully lull the fortunate into a trance. On the *trakt* west of Lake Baikal, the tedium might be relieved by the passage of a clinking column of somber convicts or procession of big-wheeled barrels of vodka heading east, or a westbound procession of tea carts.

It is difficult to say whether the *trakt* spawned development along the Tea Road, or vice versa. Russians had savored their initial taste of Chinese tea during the first half of the seventeenth century and quickly adopted it as their national drink. Their voracious demand gave birth to the Tea Road, the trade route that funneled precious bales of tea to the thirsty masses in Europe. From its origin at Kalgan behind China's Great Wall, camel caravans lumbered across the Gobi desert to the Outer Mongolian city of Urga, thence to Kyakhta, a Russian border town made rich by the trade. Sledges, boats and other conveyances carried the tea to Irkutsk via Verkhne-Udinsk and Lake Baikal. Naturally the profitable tea trade generated subsidiary commerce in leather, sheepskins, furs, horns, woolen clothes, coarse linens, manufactured silks, nankeen cloth, porcelain, rhubarb, cattle and Chinese produce. Cossacks were thinly deployed along the Tea Road, the *trakt* and frontier not only to protect traders but to legitimize the tsar's claim on the new territory.

The *trakt* and Tea Road accelerated the growth of Irkutsk, which, since Spiridon Lingusov's caravan passed through with a load of Chinese wares in 1698, had already grown into a prosperous regional trading hub and showed signs of becoming a budding center of industry. Cossack and settler farms thrived on the fertile earth nearby, and the city prospered enough to replace its village church with Bogoyavleniya Cathedral in 1718. In 1719, Irkutsk earned the mantle of provincial capital over a domain that stretched east along a chain of towns and villages originally seeded by Cossack *ostrogi* (forts) in the seventeenth century, principally Verkhne-Udinsk, Chita, Sretensk and Nerchinsk. On the heels of Irkutsk's newfound prestige came a city hall, courts, magistrates, merchants, tradesmen, shopkeepers and all of the trappings of civilization that most Cossacks tried earnestly to avoid.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, the Cossacks had now become an instrument of the government instead of its nemesis, and although this unusual marriage did not tame them, it did

institutionalize their society and traditions, making them subject to a special body of law, setting forth conditions for military service, elections of *atamans* (chiefs), property ownership and other aspects of life. Yet, beneath the thin veneer of explorer, frontiersman or farmer lay the dormant beast of Cossack brigand, libertine or rapist. Stefan Petrovich Krasheninikov, a scientist who accompanied Vitus Bering through Siberia about 1740, wrote:

The Cossacks, a people rude enough themselves, seemed to be pretty well pleased with the manner of living here, using the natives as slaves, who furnished them with sables and other furs in abundance, and passing the greatest part of their time at playing cards. Their only want seemed to be that of brandy. In gambling for brandy...the gamesters wagered their furs and when they had no furs, even their slaves. What the poor slaves endured is almost incredible, being obliged sometimes to change their masters twenty times a day.<sup>12</sup>

Just as the Cossacks reshaped the societies they invaded, Siberian conditions gradually molded Cossack society to better accommodate the hardships and demands of frontier life. The loneliness of wilderness living led to Cossack intermarriage with local women, and the melding of Cossack traditions with local ones. Likewise Siberia's demands on Cossack services differed quite a bit from those expected of the older *voiskos* in the Don and Volga river basins, so a Siberian Cossack Host was established, tailored to Siberian measurements. While Cossacks continued to swear loyalty only to God and Tsar, the manner in which God was worshipped gradually became less important in Siberia as Shamanists, Lamaists and Buddhists seeped into the ranks which had traditionally been all Orthodox Christian. Also, in contrast to their western brethren, Siberian Cossacks were paid individually, were granted personal rather than communal freedoms and were overseen by Russian governors. The close living of the interconnected communities that intimately bonded Don, Volga and Caucasian Cossacks to their brethren was impossible in Siberia, where communities were often separated by hundreds of miles of wilderness and hostile natives. Siberian Cossacks were scattered across the map, acting as 'official tribute collectors, guides and militiamen', and sometimes serving as the sole representative of tsar and his vast imperial administration, a lone beacon of Christendom and Western culture in a dark green sea of shamans and pagans.<sup>13</sup> Anyway, the village, the core social unit of Cossack life in the west and font of communal property, was weakened by an 1869 law allowing all individual Cossacks to own property.

A century after the European invaders appeared east of Lake Baikal, independent units of Evenki and Buryats were formed to perform security and administrative functions that had traditionally been the domain of the Siberian Cossacks. These units formed the catalysts for an Evenki regiment that was organized in 1762 and for four Buryat regiments of 600 men each established two years later.<sup>14</sup> On 17 March 1851, the Governor-General of eastern Siberia, Nikolai N. Murav'ev, established the Transbaikal Cossack Host with its headquarters at Chita and regional centers at Verkhne-Udinsk in the west and Nerchinsk in the east. Its ranks were built around the existing Evenki and Buryat regiments, and buttressed by an infusion of 29,000 peasant emigrants.<sup>15</sup> A

Western traveler described them as ‘wild, untaught, and savage to the backbone’, even 50 years after their formation.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, in 1857, when General Murav’ev led an armed flotilla down the Amur to take the river basin territory for Russia, he took 12,000 supposed ‘volunteers’ from the Transbaikal Cossacks. They gave birth to the Amur Cossack Host, which, owing to its extreme isolation and danger, was recruited with special incentives—exemption from military service, cash, timber to make rafts and other enticements. Coming at a time when the creaking Qing dynasty was preoccupied with the Second Anglo-French Opium War and the Taiping Rebellion, Murav’ev’s aggressive colonization forced the Chinese to recognize the Amur river as the Sino-Russian border in May 1858. To keep the diplomatic accounts of favors and counterfavors straight, China ‘owed’ Russia for the latter’s role in mediating an end to British and French aggression.

In subsequent years, 6,500 Amur Cossacks were drafted or enticed to foster the Ussuri Cossack Host, which surged to the Sea of Japan and founded Vladivostok in 1860 for their ambitious master, Murav’ev.<sup>17</sup> The lines of the empire had been drawn, impelled by lust, hunger for freedom, greed and patriotism.

### Frontier Siberia

As the dawn of the twentieth century loomed on the horizon, daily life for most people in Siberia stumbled along to a monotonous rhythm unchanged in centuries. A handful of large towns strewn through the taiga between Lake Baikal and the Pacific coast carried the torch of progress, reaping the riches of commerce, administering and taxing the outlands, and tinkering with new ideas that arrived from the West. The native peoples had been subjugated or assimilated, but Russia’s growth along the Amur river and Pacific were causing new tensions with their Chinese and Japanese neighbors. Yet old, internal tensions stood poised to change or disrupt everything in the twentieth century.

By 1897, more than 4.5 million Russians lived in Siberia, though most had not ventured far beyond the *trakt* in western Siberia. Three major waves of immigration had swept new faces into eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East: Cossacks in the seventeenth century, Old Believers in the eighteenth century, and Peasants in the nineteenth century. The abolition of serfdom in 1861 swelled the numbers, although officially Russians needed permission inscribed in an internal passport to relocate. Peasant immigrants who resettled with official blessing after 1889 received 15 *dessiatins* (40.5 acres), a three-year tax holiday and nine years exemption from military service. However, it was easier for immigrants to be declared ‘Siberians’ by bureaucrats than by their new neighbors. Prince Kropotkin sneered dramatically, ‘He is a “Russian”—a term of contempt with the *Sibiryak*.’<sup>18</sup> In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the term ‘Siberians’ referred to European immigrants who settled in Siberia before the railway arrived with tens of thousands more homesteaders.

Exiles had reluctantly followed closely on the heels of the first settlers in Siberia.<sup>19</sup> Beginning in 1754, the systematic exile of convicts, prisoners of war and political malcontents was used to populate villages and labor camps. Nobles who plotted the unsuccessful December 1825 uprising against the autocracy added an elite class to Siberia’s social strata of exiles when they were banished to villages in the Irkutsk and

Transbaikal regions. The Polish revolt of 1863 and peasant revolts in the Ukraine infused a number of villages with Siberia's largest Catholic congregations. Still, political exiles never comprised more than 2 percent of the exiles; most were peasants charged by landowners, clergy or other non-judicial authorities with imprecise misdeeds such as 'vagabondage' or 'vile behavior'.<sup>20</sup> Violent criminals and social deviants—heretics, homosexuals and the like—fleshed out the body of exiles.

*Staroveri*, Old Believers, comprised one of the largest exile groups in Transbaikalia. They were the byproducts of a traumatic 1653 schism (*raskol*) in the Russian Orthodox Church, which pitted traditionalists, the *staroveri* (or *raskolniki*), against reformers backed by Tsar Alexei Romanov and the Russian Orthodox patriarch, Archbishop Nikhon of Novgorod. Nikhon intended to modernize Russian rituals to conform with those of other—foreign—Eastern Orthodox churches, but a 1666 council of Eastern Orthodox patriarchs that assembled in Moscow to resolve the conflict aggravated the situation by excommunicating millions of Russian Orthodox Christians. Nikhon virulently purged the clergy and flock of Old Believers, zealously promoting his reforms with flogging, burning at the stake and exile. To the Old Believers, following Nikhon's errant flock and accepting the modernized church rituals entailed nothing less than damnation; the contentious 1666 council signaled an alien takeover of their church and heralded the coming of the Antichrist. During ensuing years, the *raskolnikis'* Western European farmland lay fallow while 'the faithful adorned themselves in burial clothes and awaited the end of the world in their cemeteries at night, singing hymns and sitting in wooden coffins'.<sup>21</sup> Some communities committed mass suicide. In 1682, Tsar Peter III ('the Great' to non-Believers) took the throne and in 1706 launched his personal crusade to Westernize Russia, forcing foreign customs, dress and the shaving-off of beards upon the obstinate peasantry, while targeting Old Believers in particular for violent persecution because of their obstruction. They sought refuge from the blasphemous modernization, often among the Cossackry in Russia's border areas and the autocracy obliged die-hard Old Believers by exiling them to the fringes of the empire. The first *staroveri* moved into Irkutsk in 1756 and by the early nineteenth century exiles from Ukrainian, Belorussian and Polish points of origin had established successful settlements along the Uda and lower Selenga Rivers in Transbaikalia. In Transbaikalia they became known as *semeiskie*, literally the family ones, because whole families were exiled.<sup>22</sup> Warm bonds developed between Old Believers and Cossacks and the Believers' 'defense of the old ritual became the defense of Russia's history, [and] as western influence continued to grow, it became a defense of native cultural tradition as well'.<sup>23</sup>

Other sizeable minorities at the turn of the century included about 40,000 Chinese and no less than 25,000 Koreans usually living in small communities on the outskirts of towns in the Russian Far East. Several thousand Japanese migrants were widely dispersed between Irkutsk and Vladivostok. Asian immigration exploded during the next two decades, easily swelling these numbers fourfold. The population of the indigenous Evenki had declined to 70,000, but the resilient Buryat Mongols had made the best of the Russian invasion.

In 1897, somewhere between 220,000 and 300,000 Buryats lived in Russia's Far East, most in the region around Lake Baikal and in Transbaikal Province. Though largely pastoral nomads on the Transbaikal steppe—packing up their eight-sided yurts twice a year to migrate between summer pastures and winter camps—the Buryats' patrilineal

clans living closer to Lake Baikal included many skilled farmers, hunters, fishermen, lumberjacks and artisans. Some Buryats had joined the tsarist civil service, and many lived in towns alongside ‘Siberian’ neighbors and adopted European dress when it suited them. Buryats in traditional garb were a common sight in Transbaikalian cities: pig-tailed men with furred hats shaped like yurts, wrapped in fur robes secured by ornate belts; women in derby hats, ankle-length skirts, and goatskin coats, overladen with silver, coral, malachite and mother of pearl jewelry. Buryat culture owed its strength to its people’s willingness and ability to fight total subjugation by the Russians, as demonstrated by their exemption from the *yasak* in earlier times.<sup>24</sup> By the turn of the century, Buryats enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with the government and escaped convicts and exiles made a point of avoiding their settlements to avoid being turned in.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps the endemic violence in Russia’s Far Eastern society comes as no surprise considering that the population was drawn from convicts, exiles, fugitives, peasant migrants torn away from their family roots in European Russia and descendants of Genghis Khan, not to mention that the authorities themselves, the Cossacks, were the offspring of a culture of piracy and rebellion. Indeed, during the infancy of Siberia’s settlements, flogging, lip- and nose-slitting and burial alive were still officially sanctioned punishments among the Cossacks.

Exile and *katorga*—hard labor—stimulated Siberian demographics with a rich diversity of criminals and dissidents, who shaped the region’s attitudes toward the state, law and order and life. By 1896 some 17,000 to 20,000 convicts—along with their hapless spouses and children—were herded east on the *trakt* each year to forsaken Siberian mines and villages.<sup>26</sup> The unfortunate, who could not adjust to the stresses of 10-hour workdays in winter or 14 hours in summer, faced death from overwork, exposure, brutal beatings, starvation, a variety of diseases, or suicide (drinking the toxins of matches soaked in water was a popular escape according to Trotsky). Their sufferings christened Siberia as the ‘land of exile’.

As of 1901, no less than 17,000 men and women had been ‘transported for life’ to Transbaikalia and the increasing pace of revolutionary activity in European Russia during subsequent years swelled the numbers.<sup>27</sup> They included ‘some of the vilest criminals of the human race’, a fact attributed to Russia’s infrequent application of capital punishment.<sup>28</sup> They also included many innocents, exiled to Siberia for some slight against a property-owner. Upper class reliance on the tsarist exile system to enforce the exploitation of peasants and workers stoked the caustic violence of class hatred. Runaways from the system took to the forests each spring—‘when the cuckoo cried’—and the hills around Chita sparkled with their campfires. Thousands of escaped convicts and exiles—‘the terror of the Transbaikalian province’—skulked in the forests or marshes, desperate enough to kill to relieve a citizen of a legitimate passport.<sup>29</sup>

Governors-General of Siberian provinces had no trouble relieving citizens of their rights and property and, so conveniently far from St Petersburg, ruled their domains like ‘personal fiefdoms’.<sup>30</sup> Given the vast distances between settlements, local authorities could transform into petty tyrants, and power and justice was often distorted in the myopic world of an isolated village. ‘Private and especially romantic, conflicts frequently took on the proportions of drama’, wrote an exiled Leon Trotsky of life in the dismal villages of Ust-Kut and Verkholsk, Irkutsk *Guberniya* (Province). Even Ust-Kut, a tiny

‘village comprised [of] about a hundred peasant huts, had seen “days of wild debauches, robberies, and murders”’.<sup>31</sup>

Siberia’s sexual mores were warped by isolation, the absence of family, authority or religious pressure and by an aching shortage of women that inspired Cossacks (and centuries of forlorn men before them) to kidnap and trade in indigenous women.<sup>32</sup> As settlements grew, Cossack women influenced the budding Siberian society with their ‘high degree of sexual license’.<sup>33</sup> The large numbers of convicts and exiles reinforced this trend, particularly as they included many ‘dissipated women, bloated with self-indulgence and apparently dead to every consideration except that of personal profit and enjoyment’.<sup>34</sup> Rumors were whispered of renegade Christian cults in Siberian villages that engaged in sexual orgies such as the *khlisti* (whippers), in which a wanderer, destined to notoriety, named Grigorii Efimovich Rasputin indulged.<sup>35</sup> Immigrants quickly adjusted to the milieu. Siberia’s sexual appetites would eventually pose a strategic conundrum, as the daughters of Korean and Japanese farmers, sold by their fathers to prostitution rings, staffed a vast chain of brothels that began spreading west from Vladivostok in 1883.<sup>36</sup>

Further loosening of Siberia’s inhibitions was fueled by ‘the great propensity which the Russians generally had for strong liquors, the ladies as well as the gentlemen’.<sup>37</sup> Vodka inflamed passions from shared bottles in post stations on the *trakt* and from barrels in wild Cossack bacchanalias. No Buryat homestead was complete without a barrel or more of *tarasun*, a ‘highly alcoholic colorless liquid’ distilled from mare’s milk, fermenting under a lean-to by the house (although such home production of *tarasun* was technically illegal).<sup>38</sup> Celebrations, notably Easter, brought out ‘fantastic head-dresses and pink-flowered gowns of the women, and the red blouses of the men’, and days of round-the-clock carousing fueled by liquor.<sup>39</sup> In colder months, the harsh climate and ennui of being snowbound for days at a time—on top of the daily peril of life in the wilderness, encouraged tipling.

The land itself could be cruel. Summer’s warmth casts a deceiving glow upon the Transbaikal taiga and steppe. July is the only frost-free month. Winter freezes rivers to the bottom and snow softens the shade until the summer’s peak. When Trotsky crossed the Lena during his springtime escape from Ust-Kut, the river was full of ‘loose timber and dead animals’ and whirlpools.<sup>40</sup> For anyone unfortunate enough to become stranded or lost, starvation usually beckoned long before rescuers knew of any problem. The lonely ‘runaway paths’ leading away from labor camps were dotted with the bones of those who ‘vanished like a cloud in the sky on a hot summer day’, as Prince Kropotkin referred to those who fell ill, broke a bone or starved to death on the run. Around Lake Baikal, the usual Siberia hazards were compounded by earthquakes, unusually powerful thunderstorms and other bizarre natural phenomena that could kill the unwary.

Tales of the empty *tarantass* rolling into a village, all aboard having been devoured by some predator, attest to the fear inspired by the taiga’s denizens. Man did not stand at the top of Siberia’s food chain. Brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) standing 10 feet tall and weighing over 1,500 pounds generally roamed unsettled areas, but, in years of poor pine nut crops, searched wherever they pleased for substitute menu items, such as livestock or man. In Transbaikalia’s harsh, dry habitat, man-eating bears were more prevalent than in other parts of Siberia.<sup>41</sup> Massive tigers also prowled east of Lake Baikal, especially in the Ussuri district, but wolves were the ‘most numerous and destructive beasts of prey in Siberia’ and did not hesitate to attack men when desperate for food.<sup>42</sup> Yet, the predators

that made life most miserable came in ‘overpowering swarms’ of mosquitoes and midges voracious enough to drain the life out of livestock.<sup>43</sup>

Village life could exacerbate Siberia’s risks. The typical, unpainted wooden house, each looking as if it had endured a hundred winters, underlined the grim monotony. Some sagged into the mushy soil until the window sills, ablaze in geraniums during summer’s brief blush, grazed tired paths daubed with garbage and manure of roaming livestock, pigs and cats. Some wretched, chained mongrel usually snarled at every passerby when not curled into a dusty cavity scratched into the dirt yard. Beyond the lucky iron horseshoe inevitably set into the principal threshold of each peasant *izba*, the houses were often dark, overcrowded, poor ventilated and filthy. A cornucopia of deadly diseases flourished in unsanitary dwellings: plague, typhus, ‘relapsing fever’, typhoid fever, scarlet fever, measles, mumps, whooping cough and ‘malignant sore throat’. Infant mortality amidst such squalor was ‘very great’.<sup>44</sup> Tedium and isolation could breed psychosis or dangerous behavior like alcoholism, chronic abuse or incest.

Typhoid and other diseases transmitted by drinking contaminated water were endemic. In any settlement of substantial size, water was distributed by Chinese vendors who served the public with ‘filthy water carts’. Wells, streams and even sizeable sections of rivers were sometimes polluted with animal waste. ‘Sometimes it was green, and sometimes brown, and always tainted with decayed organic matter’, wrote Charles Wenyon of the drinking water he was offered during a late nineteenth-century journey on the *trakt*. ‘But as the average Siberian peasant only uses water to dilute his vodka and infuse his tea’, reasoned Wenyon, ‘the danger may have been less serious than it seemed.’<sup>45</sup> Luckily the drinking of *chai* (tea) was a common social ritual at all hours; samovars gurgled day and night in every public establishment.

Until civil war cast its shadow across Siberia, food was ‘abundant and cheap’. Luxuriant vegetables thrived, especially fertilized as they were by ‘liquefied night soil’—human excrement, a detail that many uninitiated newcomers would belatedly discover when the wrenching cramps and chills of dysentery soon followed an undercooked meal. Alas, as the last years of the nineteenth century faded the menu of hazards to human health dished out by Siberia had remained unchanged for millennia.

In past millennia invading armies and great migrations traditionally brought change into Siberia, but the twentieth century rushed into Siberia on iron rails. Nikolai Murav’ev, the empire-builder who engineered Russia’s final expansion to the Pacific, had begun clamoring for a Far Eastern Railway soon after his 1857 conquest of the Amur basin and appointment as Governor-General of the new territory. In 1886, Tsar Alexander III, looking to cement and bolster Russia’s presence in Asia, committed funds of the Russian treasury to the engineering and construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway. Wasting no time, survey teams set out to plot the railway’s course during the following year. On 19 May 1891, the tsarevich, Nikolai Alexandrovich, ceremoniously laid a symbolic first stone of Trans-Siberian construction on the future site of the Vladivostok train station. When his father, Alexander III, died of kidney disease in November 1894, the 26-year-old Tsarevich was crowned Nicholas II and inherited humanity’s most grandiose engineering project, along with one-sixth of the world’s landmass and 100 million illiterate, superstitious, impoverished and restless peasants. Like the young untested Tsar, the bold Trans-Siberian Railway project seemed to embody Russia’s aspiration to emerge from its feudal gloom into a new century of promise.

The entire nation threw its savings and the minds of its best scientists and engineers into Trans-Siberian construction. Within two years of Alexander's death, nearly 90,000 men -laborers hired out of European Russia, convicts and soldiers—were crashing through the taiga and marshes, east from Chelyabinsk and west from Vladivostok, paralleling the *trakt* where possible, wielding the simplest of tools—axes, handsaws, picks, shovels and wheel-barrows. Despite their primitive implements, they would lay approximately 15,000 miles of track by the end of the decade, including, of course, branches, spurs, sidings and other peripheral lines and countless bridges, some of them engineering marvels in their own right that defied Asia's most powerful rivers.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, to keep costs down and meet their aggressive schedule, they took shortcuts that would eventually return to haunt the railway. For example, on stretches of the Ussuri and Western Siberian lines, specifications were relaxed to allow for narrower railbeds, thinner layers of ballast and lighter rails than were necessary.<sup>47</sup> Many bridges were constructed of wood, though engineers preferred metal. The engineering challenges were not only compounded by tight budgets, marshy terrain dissected by alternately frozen or raging rivers and work gangs of illiterates and convicts, but by pressure from the Tsar himself.

The monumental construction of the Circumbaikal Line, in the shadows of the frosty Khamar Daban mountains between the lakeside towns of Baikal, Slyudyanka and Mysovaya, faced the most obstacles. Though only 162 miles (244 versts) in length, it took five years and 220 rubles per *verst* to build, three times as much as any other stretch that length, because of the need to blast 41 tunnels through the precipices alongside Lake Baikal.<sup>48</sup> When it finally opened for regular traffic in October 1905, it would take a train four hours to skirt the lake's crystalline waters, clinging to cliffsides, tumbling over stony ridges, diving through tunnels, all the while twisting, coiling and uncoiling over tight turns like a wandering snake.<sup>49</sup> Still, it made for an easier journey than the alternative, taking the train ferry-icebreaker *Baikal*.<sup>50</sup>

By 1899, the Trans-Siberian Railway connected Irkutsk to European Russia, and by 1903, it linked Vladivostok to St Petersburg, although construction was far from finished in the Amur district, so that just east of Chita the railway took a shortcut through Manchuria to the Ussuri line. Regardless of its sociopolitical disappointments and economic shortcomings, the Trans-Siberian Railway was a marvelous engineering feat.

To Russia's government, the Trans-Siberian Railway promised prestige, a solid presence in the new Amur and Ussuri territories on the Pacific, security as a national defense asset, revenue from expanded commerce and pressure relief from the poor and explosive masses in Europe begging for a piece of land. To businessmen, the Iron Road (*zheleznaya doroga*) opened new markets, broadened sources of supply and offered a new source of profits. To the poor, it offered an escape route to land of their own, a chance to gamble the future on eastward migration. But the railway could not solve Russian society's ills. Indeed, electric lighting from the weekly *Train de Luxe* literally cast a stark light on the gulf between rich and poor, as railside hovels quivered and flashed in the golden glow from the luxurious *coupés*, 'where you can shut your door and sleep all day if you prefer it, or eat and drink, smoke and play cards if you like that better', wrote one well-off 1901 traveler who was amazed by individual electric reading lights and separate electric bells to summon a waiter or attendant.<sup>51</sup> Alas, the railway by itself could 'not substantially relieve the pressure for land in European Russia; it merely

intensified the peasants' craving for land of their own and hastened the end of the communal system'.<sup>52</sup>

As for the railway's economic shortcomings, Russian planners realized before the system was completed 'that in the competition for through-freights, the Trans-Siberian Railway may not cope with the steamship lines to Europe, either in rates or time... The time between Vladivostok and Hamburg, under present conditions, will be about the same either by rail or steamer, with the advantage of uninterrupted passage and fragmentary rates in favour of the latter.'<sup>53</sup>

Of course, the Tsar did not invest 1.5 billion rubles to lay a pair of iron rails across Asia merely to gamble on unpredictable returns from the freight-carrying business. Russia had its eye on real estate—Manchuria, Korea, Mongolia and Tibet, rich untapped natural resources and even more so on the geopolitical advantage such desolate real estate offered during an age of empires.<sup>54</sup> 'One of the most potent instruments of world-dominion to-day is the railway', wrote the sensationalist travel writer Burton Holmes at the turn of the century. 'Russia wields modern weapons. The Trans-Siberian Railway is the latest acquisition in her arsenal of conquest.'<sup>55</sup>

### **Russia's Asian neighbors and the Iron Road**

Sixty-one miles east of Chita the double-tracks of the Trans-Siberian Railway split at the town of Karymskaya. One line headed southeast through the Transbaikalian steppe toward China, 300 miles away, where, at the frontier, the line became the Chinese Eastern Railway as it cut across northern Manchuria.<sup>56</sup> The other line bore northeast in a wide loop around Manchuria, shadowing the Amur river on Russian territory and passing 1,248 miles (1,997 kilometers) through Russia's Amur and Ussuri districts to the city of Khabarovsk and on to the Pacific coast. The two lines met again at Nikolsk-Ussuriisk, then terminated 60 miles south at the docks of Vladivostok. The shorter and faster Chinese Eastern route was preferred by most travelers.

Manchuria, the native soil of the ruling Qing dynasty and its Manchu bureaucracy, was, of course, Chinese territory. However, at the turn of the century, Manchuria's absorption into the Russian Empire seemed to be a fait accompli to some observers. An 1899 article in *Scientific American*, a popular US magazine, declared, 'Port Arthur is destined to become the great city of Siberia' and referred to Russia's 'recently acquired territory of Manchuria'. British expatriates in Manchuria, mostly merchants and missionaries, considered the territory 'Russian in all but name'.<sup>57</sup> However, Manchuria was *not* Russian territory, though it was an 'extraterritorial zone' where Russian laws and control prevailed.

Manchuria's strange situation was the result of China's growing social disorder, internal division and weakness. In 1857, Nikolai Murav'ev and his Cossacks had plowed into the Amur river basin planting Russian flags and settlements with little fear of Chinese retribution, in spite of the 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk and 1727 Treaty of Kyakhta, both of which defined the limits of Russia's expansion. China's Qing emperor was preoccupied with the sixth bloody year of the Taiping Rebellion, coming on the heels of catastrophic droughts, famines, floods, economic failures, boiling public disgust against the Manchu rulers, and the stinging disgrace of the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing. The Treaty

was the final humiliating slap of the Opium War—the First Anglo-Chinese War, in which the defeated emperor ceded Hong Kong to Britain and opened the door for European colonialists to sow China's coast with extraterritorial treaty ports and carve peripheral states from its carcass. By 1885, France had swallowed most of southeast Asia—Cochin China, Cambodia and Annam and Britain controlled Burma.

In the 1890s a new player came to the fore in the east Asian fray—Japan. A harbinger of Japan's heightening competitiveness was the celebrated ride of Captain Fukushima Yasumasa. Supposedly on a challenge from some German officers, Fukushima, the Japanese Military Attaché to Germany, rode his horse from Berlin to Vladivostok, traversing European Russia, Siberia, Mongolia and Manchuria on the way. Fukushima was feted as a hero upon his arrival in Tokyo in 1893. Fukushima's 15-month excursion propelled his career as a leading military intelligence officer, and, most of all, spotlighted all of Japan's primary areas of strategic concern but one—Korea.<sup>58</sup>

Unfortunately for Korea, both Russia and Japan coveted it. Following the lead of the European bullies in China, Japan gradually muscled its way onto Korean soil and into its internal affairs through a series of treaties: Kanghwa in 1876, Chemulpo in 1882 and the Li-Ito Convention in 1884. A populist anti-Japanese and anti-Western movement, Tonghak (Eastern Learning), which blended Confucian religious tenets with Korean nationalism, was penetrated by agents provocateurs controlled by the Genyosha, a Japanese terrorist organization advocating aggressive imperial expansion.<sup>59</sup> Genyosha, acting on behalf of the Japanese Army Intelligence Service, 'used the *Tonghaks* for agitation and disruption and generally weakening [Korean] government influence'. In 1892, the Tonghaks began orchestrating large-scale demonstrations against Korea's King Kojong that led to brutal suppression. At the request of King Kojong, Chinese forces were dispatched to Seoul's aid in 1894 and Tonghak leaders responded positively to conciliatory promises by the government. However, Japan seized the opportunity to feign helping its little neighbor defend its sovereignty and, on 25 July 1894, sank a Chinese troopship near Asan Bay. This began the first Sino-Japanese War, although Japan did not declare war on China for another six days.

The Japanese soundly beat the Chinese on land and sea, while crushing the Tonghak movement and beheading its leader, Chon Pong-jun.<sup>60</sup> China sued for peace after a disastrous nine months of war and in the April 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki, agreed to give Japan Formosa and choice morsels of Manchuria—Port Arthur and the Liaotung peninsula.

Russia had no intention of letting Japan take possession of any part of Manchuria. Within one week, Russia compelled France and Germany to join it in pressuring Japan diplomatically to renounce its claims to the Manchurian prizes. The Japanese public howled about the 'triple intervention' cheating them of their rightful prize of war, then watched with disgust during the next five years as Russia, France, Germany and Britain carved colonial chunks out of China. Japan's bitterness would simmer for decades.<sup>61</sup>

Meanwhile, Japan wasted no time consolidating its hold on Korea, part of which involved training 800 Korean military men assigned to the palace in Seoul. This literally opened the doors for Japan's next brazen move. At dawn on 8 October 1895, Genyosha assassins charged into Kyongbokgung Palace in Seoul, murdered Queen Min, then incinerated her body with kerosene. The Japanese Minister to Korea, Miura Goro, shamelessly repatriated the perpetrators before they could be apprehended by Korean

authorities.<sup>62</sup> The queen's killing sounded the deathknell for the 'greedy, cruel and rapacious personal despotism' of the Korean throne, and for the next half century of Korean independence as well.<sup>63</sup> Year after year, Japan imposed more controls on the Korean population while introducing—and expropriating land for—its own emigrants in pursuit of a 'hopeless ideal—namely the integration of the Koreans with the Japanese'.<sup>64</sup>

Likewise, the Tsar relished the opportunity to 'help' his weak neighbor on the Qing throne, because China's repayment for each Russian 'favor' was so generously out of proportion to the original good deed. In part to assist China to pay Japan a 200 million tael indemnity stipulated by the Treaty of Shimonoseki, Russia arranged for a 400 million franc loan at 4 percent interest, payable in 36 years from issue in July 1895.<sup>65</sup> The loan gave birth to the Russo-Chinese Bank, which in 1910 became the Russo-Asiatic Bank and one of the world's most powerful financial institutions with 30 branches throughout east Asia. A year after issue of the loan, the Chinese were 'induced to contribute' 5 million taels towards the bank's capital. Any separation between the bank and the Russian government seemed a mere legal technicality. The statutes of the bank (approved by a Qing court softened up with generous bribes from Russian lobbyists in Peking) permitted it to receive taxes, manage local finances, mint coins and, last but certainly not least, to construct railways and telegraph systems in China.<sup>66</sup> It was hard to say whether the Russo-Asiatic Bank was a corporation with government powers, or a shadow government with corporate powers.

In March 1896, a Chinese newspaper leaked startling reports of a secret military agreement between Russia and China, not two weeks after the Russian Foreign Ministry had assured Japan that such a pact did not exist. More surprising news was in store for Japan as China's newfound intimacy with Russia came to light. A quiet 1896 Sino-Russian agreement, the Cassini Convention (named after the Tsar's minister in Peking), had, in addition to fleshing out details of the Manchurian Railway concession, promised Russia a treaty port in Kiaochow Harbor. However, in December 1897, the murder of two German Roman Catholic missionaries in Shantung province gave Kaiser Wilhelm II a pretext to invade and claim Kiaochow Harbor and nearby Tsingtao as compensation.<sup>67</sup> So, a jilted Russia informed China that it would 'take hostile measures' if, by 27 March 1898, China did not agree to the lease of Port Arthur and the Liaotung peninsula.<sup>68</sup> China agreed. For partners who had taken the vows of a secret military agreement, it was a strange way to behave. Russia's Pacific fleet, previously icebound in Vladivostok each winter, could henceforth dock in the ice-free Manchurian harbors of Port Arthur and Darien, the latter now known by its new Russian name, Dalny. The Japanese fumed.

The Chinese fumed as well. Although railways generated local jobs and commerce, they exemplified the evils of alien origin that were invading China. 'The enmity of people and officials alike seemed to be chiefly directed against two classes—Roman Catholics and mining and railroad engineers', declared a Western missionary.<sup>69</sup> Trains aroused the primitive superstitions of the uneducated millions who loathed the roaring mechanical 'fire-carts' and their endless iron tentacles that uprooted family burial places, upset the *feng shui*, and, according to popular rumor, rested upon foundations of entombed Chinese babies. The telegraph, the railway's constant companion, was no better. Telegraph wires moaned and hummed as if in pain, dripped rusty, blood-colored water after rains or heavy dew and were carried deferentially atop ranks of menacing poles that marched across the horizon, reinforcing the peasants' paranoia that the foreign

devils were up to something diabolical. Apart from the supernatural peril, a modern transportation system threatened the rice bowls of merchants, sideroad innkeepers, tax collectors and hordes of teamsters and porters whose work relied on the old patterns of commerce. The Chinese Eastern's 1,464 bridges often choked or completely blocked traffic on canals and waterways, disturbing centuries-old patterns of movement.

It is no wonder that the first mayhem of the Boxer Rebellion occurred at Fengtai, a junction of the Peking—Tientsin Railway, where xenophobic fanatics swarmed over the Empress Dowager's railway coach and destroyed it on 28 May 1900.<sup>70</sup> About 800 miles of the Chinese Eastern Railway had been laid when the Boxers erupted in an anti-Western frenzy in summer 1900.<sup>71</sup> Two years of construction went up in smoke as new stations were torched, warehouses were plundered, tracks were uprooted and assets and personnel were attacked. Troops were rushed over the Trans-Siberian to relieve the beleaguered engineers, missionaries and diplomats in China.

One event in early September 1900 illustrated the unique hazards of the new railway's savage environment, when 'a band of desperados lifted the rails in front of a train that was on the way from Lake Baikal to Chita' (Transbaikalia's administrative and commercial center). Unfortunately for all concerned, it turned out to be a troop train. Eleven soldiers died in the derailment; the bandits got nothing.<sup>72</sup>

The bloody tide of the Boxer pandemonium swept right up to Russia's doorstep. 'On the other side of the [Amur] river, drums began to beat and banners waved and then bullets came dropping into the Blagoveshchensk streets', terrifying the citizens and the small 60-Cossack detachment that was the city's only defense. The government would later claim that an 18-day bombardment took 40 lives, while other accounts say that only windows were broken. In an effort to not appear impotent, the governor, one Chichegov, ordered the city's 8,000 or so peaceful Chinese residents to go back to China. Having no boats with which to cross the Amur, they hunkered down in their homes hoping to ride out the storm of xenophobic vengeance. Eager to strike back at anything Chinese, Chichegov had the Cossacks herd groups of 100 men, women and children down to the banks of the Amur where they were ordered to swim back to China. People who refused to enter the river's swift icy waters were murdered on the shore with bayonet and sword. Some 5,000 souls perished.<sup>73</sup>

Although the Boxer Rebellion added 70 million rubles to construction costs, Russia transformed this negative turn of events into an opportunity to sink its claws deeper into Manchuria. Protection of the railway was originally assigned to the Chinese army by the Cassini Convention, except in unspecified remote areas where Russia might be allowed 'to station special battalions of Russian infantry and cavalry'.<sup>74</sup> During the bedlam of summer 1900, however, Russian soldiers deployed across wide areas of Manchuria. After the Boxer Rebellion, the Chinese Eastern was allowed to expand the railway guard force into its own private army.

By 1902, Russian railways crisscrossed Manchuria. The Chinese Eastern Railway was 920 miles long, entering from Transbaikalia at Manchuli, crossing the Manchurian steppe to Harbin and reentering Russian territory at Pogrannichnaya, not too distant from Vladivostok. The southern Manchurian line stretched south from Harbin 650 miles to Port Arthur. A six-mile spur linked Port Arthur to Dalny. Both railways seeded new Russian settlements and helped to subtly graft the territory onto Siberia.

Similarly in Korea, a Japanese-built railway between the port of Pusan and Seoul accelerated the infusion of Japanese immigrants and influence, and the extraction of exports. Meanwhile a fault line of Russian and Japanese imperial pressures was building up at the Manchurian-Korean border. Russia sought to extend its power via an extension of the railway from Mukden on the southern Manchurian line to the Korean port of Masanpho. Diplomats negotiated for two years to avoid the imminent crisis to no avail. On 7 February 1904 the countries ominously severed diplomatic relations and went to war.

By mid-summer, Russians were disillusioned with their military's lackluster performance against the Asian upstarts: 'Gallant little Japan' had pinned Russia on two fronts, besieging Port Arthur and holding it along the length of the southern Manchurian line.<sup>75</sup> For ten years, liberals, disgruntled workers and idealistic students disappointed with Nicholas II's apathy towards poverty and land reform had been demonstrating occasionally in the streets for a loosening of Russia's autocratic shackles, sometimes bold enough to raise traditional red flags of revolt before gendarmes and Cossacks charged into them with sabers. Now moved by the government's lumbering uncertainty in its campaign in Manchuria, new voices joined the chorus of opposition. Even the *zemstvos* (local elected assemblies first introduced by Tsar Alexander II in 1864) began to call for a constitutional monarchy. From the shadows of illegal opposition, the Socialist Revolutionaries, the loose association of secret political groups formed four years earlier, increased agitation and propaganda against the government. On 28 July 1904 terrorists celebrated the killing of the Minister of Interior—'the greatest statesman in Russia', in a bold assassination with a hand-held bomb on a St Petersburg thoroughfare cordoned by police. Minister von Plehve, his carriage, coachmen and horses were shredded by the blast.<sup>76</sup> Assassinations had become commonplace, but the brashness of this particular incident emboldened radical reformers. By 1906 and 1907 the tempo of assassinations would climb to 4,000 a year.<sup>77</sup>

That number of men would be slaughtered in a morning in places like Nanshan and Mukden, Manchuria. The Russo-Japanese War was a chain reaction of disasters for Russia. For 18 months, combatants on both sides struggled heroically with frequent displays of chivalry that obscured the horrors of modern warfare. Reinforcements from European Russia began trickling through the narrow pipeline of the Trans-Siberian Railway, but it took until autumn 1904 to accumulate enough men on the front for a counterattack. While Russia faced the daunting test of sustaining logistics for a war front situated a continent away from its supply base, corruption and ineptness better explain the empire's failures.

Problems at chokepoints in the Trans-Siberian supply chain illustrated the failures and foretold future tribulations. 'A hectic time' prevailed at Listvinichnaya and Mysovaya, where the transit of men, munitions and materiel transformed the quiet lakeside villages into boisterous frontier boomtowns.

Champagne flowed like water. Bedizened vice flaunted itself at every turn. Graft was rampant. Each evening found everyone—generals, colonels, lieutenants, conscripts, Manchurian coolies, and even the numerous uniformed convicts who were drafted to put a shoulder to the wheel of the chariot of Juggernaut—totting up the day's non-official

earnings. Everyone demanded, or expected, extra rubles for doing his duty...<sup>78</sup>

In one case a theft ring misdirected seven carloads of champagne, which was transported in 'sealed ammunition cars' to both ensure smooth handling by illiterate soldiery and discourage tampering. A ring of army officers shuffled the seven freight cars out of Irkutsk's jumbled railyard, unloaded them, changed their identification markings and attached them to a westbound train while the champagne was smuggled into southern Manchuria. The ring's larceny cleared about 100,000 rubles.<sup>79</sup>

The concentration of military and civilian resources made the rail corridor a vital target for hostile intelligence and an irresistible lure for counterintelligence. George Digby, an adventurous scholar in the Far East, wrote, 'The Japanese were kept perfectly informed about affairs by scores of intelligence officers, looking like Khalka Mongols, Buryats and Manchus, who had been studying the requisite languages for years, in order to get jobs as coolies and transport workers when the long foreseen struggle with Russia should at last materialize.' They were the forward elements of an elaborate system of Japanese espionage that extended to the frontlines in Manchuria, generating detailed orders of battle and reports of troop movements, attitudes and technical vulnerabilities.<sup>80</sup> But Listvinichnaya and Mysovaya also offered splendid perches for Russian counterspies, who detected and summarily executed 'quite a number' of undercover Japanese agents—and a number of [innocent] unfortunate Mongols, Buryats and Manchus, as well'.<sup>81</sup>

The siege of Port Arthur ended suddenly in January 1905 with a scandalous surrender. Huge armies fought the grand finale on land at Mukden between 23 February and 16 March 1905, ending in a Russian withdrawal. At sea, the Tsar's Baltic fleet sailed halfway around the world in a well-publicized six-month voyage to be promptly sunk on 27 May 1905 by Admiral Togo Heihachiro's British-trained and equipped navy in the Battle of Tsushima Straits.

Japan had possessed the foresight to arrange an endgame by arranging with the United States before the war to officiate a peace treaty. The Treaty of Portsmouth rewarded Japan with Russia's railways, bases and treaty rights in southern Manchuria: the Liaotung peninsula, Port Arthur, Dairen and the southern Manchurian line as far north as Changchun. Japan was also given the southern half of Sakhalin Island and free license to continue her domination of Korea.<sup>82</sup>

In 1907, Russia and Japan would secretly agree to boundaries of their respective spheres of influence in Manchuria.<sup>83</sup> An intensifying focus on brother Slavs in the Balkans promised to consume Russian attention during the subsequent seven years. Japan would soon find an excuse to buy out Korea's young King Yi and annex his kingdom in August 1910, after Ito Hirobumi, 'the greatest of Meiji leaders', was gunned down by a Korean nationalist inside the Chinese Eastern Railway station in Harbin.<sup>84</sup>

The Russian government's abysmal conduct of the war caused a tremendous loss of prestige at home and abroad. In the eyes of the public, the army that could not defeat little Japan seemed all too anxious to gun down its own unarmed countrymen in peaceful demonstrations. The 'Bloody Sunday' slaughter on 22 January 1905 sparked strikes and rebellion throughout the empire. Throughout the next week, while anti-government mobs torched factories in St Petersburg, fighting broke out in Warsaw, Lodz, Riga, Finland and

the Caucasus. In a dramatic encore to von Plehve's slaying, a Socialist Revolutionary terrorist blew up Grand Duke Sergius, the Tsar's uncle and 'chief of the reactionaries', within the walls of the Kremlin on 18 February.<sup>85</sup>

Chita, of all places, emerged as a center of revolutionary activity in the Russian Far East. It seemed an unlikely locale for radical political thought, having taken 300 years since the Cossacks first settled it to even become officially classified as a town in 1870. The newspaper *Aziatskaya Rossiya* sneered at it as a place of 'dilapidated wooden houses, dirty unpaved streets with cattle and stray dogs wandering here and there. The only decent buildings are the Governor's house, Vostochno-Daurskoe Podvoro Hotel and three churches.' However, for a short time in 1905, it became the capital of the Chita Republic. The general strike in October paralyzed the Trans-Siberian Railway. Three Bolsheviks, V.K.Kurnatovsky, I.V.Babushkin and A.A.Kostyushko-Volyuzhanich organized the railway workers to take over the town and throw open the gates of Chita's notorious prison.<sup>86</sup> Kurnatovsky was a chemical engineer who had forsaken his career to pursue revolutionary activities, had shared one of his three previous terms of exile with Vladimir I.Lenin and Nadezhda K.Krupskaya at Shushenskoe, and had become acquainted with young Iosif Stalin in 1900.<sup>87</sup> The strikers persuaded soldiers of the Chita garrison to join them, and in December 1905 published and distributed 10,000 copies of one of Russia's first 'red' newspapers, *Zabaikalsky Rabochi*.<sup>88</sup> At the same time an assembly of Buryats gathered in Chita, demanding self-government and linguistic freedom. Japanese agents were suspected of stirring up the assembly and Pan-Mongol sentiments to destabilize Russia.

In Verkhne-Udinsk a strike committee sprang up in October 1905 and a subversive newspaper, *Verkhneudinskii Listok*, was passed out in the streets. In early December 2,000 people joined the strike, but within a month the authorities had shut down *Verkhneudinskii Listok* and arrested radical leaders. The uprising inspired local garrison soldiers to form the Transbaikal branch of the All-Russia Military Union in March 1907.

Even Irkutsk saw her workers and soldiers join in the general strike. On 8 November the entire 4,000-man garrison turned out for a meeting that demanded the election of a Constituent Assembly. It was a common demand during the revolution of 1905, put forth not only by the Socialist Revolutionaries and Peasants' Union, but by 14 professional unions. However, one week prior to the meeting Tsar Nicholas II took the wind out of the revolution's sails with an imperial manifesto that called for convocation of a popularly elected state дума and promised 'freedom of conscience, speech, union and association'. Nevertheless, a march on 30 November in Irkutsk turned violent as armed demonstrators fought the gendarmes.

The authorities soon terminated the Chita Republic and Kurnatovsky, according to Krupskaya, was 'seized by [Baron Alexander] Meller-Zakomelsky and handed over to [Major General Paul von] Rennenkampf' for execution.<sup>89</sup> In a similar fashion the revolution of 1905 was quelled in cities and towns across the empire, but the lines had been drawn between the 'reds' and the 'whites'.

### Mongolia and the Tournament of Shadows

At the turn of the century, Outer Mongolia was described as a place of squalor, slothfulness and degeneracy, in contrast to the industrious Buryat communities in Russia. It was a dusty, rocky wasteland, a natural reservoir of plague bacilli, that hardly seemed worthy of any interest whatsoever, much less like a target of high stakes international geopolitics.<sup>90</sup> Yet it became entangled in Russia and Britain's strategic maneuvering for central Asian spheres of influence that came to be known as 'the Great Game' (to the British) or the 'Tournament of Shadows' (to the Russians).

The unlikely catalyst of this commotion was Agvan Lobsan Dorzhiev, an energetic Buddhist lama born near Verkhne-Udinsk and educated at Drepung Monastery in Tibet. Since the late sixteenth century, the Gelug ('Yellow Hat') school of Buddhism had overlaid ancient Mongolian shamanism, binding Mongols in Siberia, Inner Mongolia and Outer Mongolia with Tibetans. Dorzhiev, an advisor to the thirteenth Dalai Lama in Lhasa, the xenophobic capital of the Tibetan theocracy, was dispatched to establish relations with Tsar Nicholas II. In contrast to the autocracy's wickedness towards Jews, Old Believers and other persecuted sects, Buryat Buddhists enjoyed a measure of sympathy, since their clergy had enjoyed legal status in Russia since 1741, when Empress Elizaveta authorized the establishment of 11 *datsans* (Buddhist spiritual centers). In fact, Buryat Buddhists venerated the tsar and his Romanov predecessors as incarnations of White Tara, a merciful Buddhist deity. A tract distributed by Dorzhiev glowingly describing Nicholas II as an 'emanation of the King of Shambhala'. Envoys of the Dalai Lama were warmly received by the Tsar and Tsarina, who were said to be intrigued by the mystique of Buddhism.

Unfortunately for the Tibetans, the British grew alarmed at the loud publicity of Dorzhiev's third mission to St Petersburg, which trumpeted the blossoming courtship between Lhasa and her Russian suitor.<sup>91</sup> Meanwhile, the Dalai Lama refused to even speak with British representatives. So, fearing that a Russian-sponsored Tibetan-Mongol nation might break free of China's suzerainty and become a threat to British interests in India, London dispatched Francis Younghusband and 3,000 troops into the Himalayas in the winter of 1903 to speak with the Dalai Lama. Around Zongshan Castle at Gyangze Younghusband's expedition defeated an outnumbered Tibetan militia equipped with pikes and other medieval weapons, then marched into Lhasa on 3 August 1904, where modern machine guns quickly subdued the populace.<sup>92</sup> The Dalai Lama fled to Mongolia. Tibet was forced to bow to British territorial demands on the India—Tibet frontier and, at Whitehall's insistence, to the continuing presence of China's *amban* (imperial advisor) Yu Tai in Lhasa.<sup>93</sup> Better a Tibet controlled by China, than an independent Tibet that might spin into the Russian orbit reasoned the Foreign Office. In August 1907, Russia and Britain formally reiterated their mutual recognition of China's domination over Tibet.

Mongolia seemed to face an even tougher fight in throwing off the Manchu yoke. In recent years, China had embarked upon a 'new course' of forced colonization through mass resettlement of Chinese, intensification of the military occupation and isolation of Mongolia from the rest of the world, especially the mischievous Russians. Plans of the Bureau for Resettlement in Beijing laid claim to 5.3 million hectares of Mongolian

territory and a Chinese commercial invasion had already begun. The number of Chinese merchants and money-lenders swelled from a few dozen to nearly 500, running up Mongolia's debt to China to 11 million lan, and reducing the entire country to penury.<sup>94</sup> Such exploitation prolonged Mongolia's feudalism, backwardness and squalidness.

Resistance against Manchu rule had been stirring in Mongolia since the late eighteenth century when Prince Amarsanaa and Prince Chingunjav led unsuccessful uprisings against the Qing occupation. In 1837, discontent with Manchu rule combined with an uproar against the feudal oppression by Mongolia's theocratic nobility to fuel a three-year revolt in Setsen Khan *aimag* (province). More recently, in 1900 when Mongol reservists were called up by Manchu authorities to quell a revolt, they instead annihilated the Chinese garrison in the western town of Uliastai, then ransacked offices of merchants and usurers. Simultaneously a similar but separate anti-Manchu uprising erupted in eastern Mongolia. Seven years later a wiry *ard* (peasant herdsman) named Ayush led another foiled rebellion, this one against the onerous feudal system that smothered *ard* families in poverty. Perhaps encouraged by Ayush, *ard* uprisings arose but were crushed in Barga and Setsen Khan *aimags* in 1909.<sup>95</sup>

At this time Russia revealed the intensity of her enchantment with her Mongol and Buddhist neighbors when the Tsar blessed Agvan Dorzhiev's plans to construct a Buddhist temple, Khram Kalachakri, in St Petersburg. Among the prominent academics and artists on the construction committee sat Prince Esper Ukhtomsky, the same young associate of the Tsar who bribed the Qing court to accede to the formation of the Russo-Chinese Bank and who accompanied the Tsarevich to lay the first stone of the Trans-Siberian in 1891.<sup>96</sup> The temple became an unofficial embassy for the Buddhist flocks of Tibet, Mongolia and Siberia.<sup>97</sup>

Anticipating the revolutionary storm to break in China, an anti-Chinese assembly of *doyons* and ranking lamas convened in Urga in July and drew up a petition for Russian assistance. The following month Tsar Nicholas II received a Mongolian delegation and promised them arms and ammunition.<sup>98</sup> Finally, on 10 October 1911 the long-awaited republican revolution in China ignited among modernized army units in Hubei province, and within six weeks inflamed 15 of the 23 other provinces which declared their independence of Qing authority. China's internal turmoil in 1911 so paralyzed the nation that little could be done to thwart Mongolian independence. On 1 December, a committee of princes and high priests declared independence, called up militia from four Khalka *aimags* and demanded the departure of the Qing *amban*, Sando. Just over two weeks later, the eighth incarnation of Buddha, Jebtsundamba Khutuktu, was declared Bogdo Khan (Holy Ruler) of a Mongolian government that merged Church and state in the Tibetan model.<sup>99</sup>

The Khutuktu and Mongolia's theocracy of lamas were unable to comprehend the vicious milieu in which independence had tossed them. Daily life in Mongolia was indiscernible from medieval existence except for the appearance of the occasional modern firearm or Tea Road trinket. Most people were chronically poor, subsisting by hunting or hiring out 'for a bit of grain'. Venereal disease afflicted most of the population. Healing was in the hands of 'itinerant magicians and quacks, working from grubby handbooks of divination' and, in similar fashion, the Khutuktu sought to cure society's ills by exorcisms and magic.

In contrast, the nobility and lamas lived lives of extravagance and debauchery. So pronounced were the excesses of the Bogdo Khan that he was even notorious in the Western world as ‘a drunken profligate’, with whom the Dalai Lama had refused to communicate during his four years in Mongolian exile (1904–08). The Bogdo Khan suffered from the advanced stages of syphilis and was blind, but still devoted more attention to his eccentric sexual appetites than to his newborn government. At the time of independence, when diplomatic efforts seemed to have been in great demand for pursuing security and assistance for Mongolia, Prince Khandadorji, Urga’s ambassador to Russia, was busy fundraising 330,000 taels of silver to purchase a special Buddha statue that might restore the Bogdo Khan’s vision.<sup>100</sup> A few months later, in preparation for services to pray for the Bogdo Khan’s long life, Mongolia’s new government wasted precious energy and money in purchasing thousands of statuettes of Ayushi (the Buddha of Long Life), even importing 9,000 of them from Poland at a cost of 23 rubles apiece. They blissfully chose to ignore the realities of modern politics and their people’s stifling pauperism and hardship.

Despite the prevalent ignorance and superstition, Mongolia was not completely devoid of contacts with the outside world. New ideas and gadgets seeped in from the commercial traffic between Russia and China on the Tea Road as it snaked through eastern Mongolia. There were even Americans in Mongolia, engineers who worked for the gold mining company Mongolore in several provinces.<sup>101</sup> It was not like Tibet, where mobs chanted ‘Kill the foreigners!’ outside guesthouses and desperately curious Western adventurers were forced into deep disguise to tour the barren country.

The Japanese demonstrated their strong interest in Mongolia in typical fashion—by setting up a secret society, Roninkai, a subsidiary of the Black Dragon Society, to gather intelligence and create a Mongolian cell of pro-Japanese activists.<sup>102</sup> This led to the formation in 1911 of Kanzan So, the Mountain of Sweat Society, formed with the goal to forge a Manchurian-Mongolian nation ‘under Japanese jurisdiction with [Manchurian police official and agent of Japanese intelligence] Prince Su Chin Wang as head of state’. Two powerful *noyons* (Mongol prince or chieftain) in Mongolia, identified as K’e-la and Pa-lin, signed agreements with Naniwa Kawashima, a samurai and exceptional covert operator, for Japanese arms, military advisers and agricultural specialists in exchange for control over their new state.<sup>103</sup> Japanese intelligence set up Su in a headquarters at Dairen and began smuggling arms to followers in Manchuria and Mongolia, though the former surely received the bulk of the weapons. Nevertheless, some 50 Japanese agents were said to have been killed while engaged in arms smuggling, confirming the aptness of Kanzan So’s descriptive moniker.<sup>104</sup>

Any arms were welcomed by the Mongolians, because, despite China’s domestic confusion, the Chinese garrisons occupying Mongolia had no intention of simply vacating the country. Not only that, it was a long road back to China through hostile territory. Outer Mongolia’s insubordination to Beijing had set off a series of secessions that could not be ignored: 35 out of 49 Inner Mongolian *khoshuun* announced their voluntary allegiance to the new state.<sup>105</sup>

The fighting fell squarely upon the shoulders of the *ard* to attack and drive out the Chinese garrisons throughout western Mongolia, although no Mongolian drama is complete without magic and mysticism. Separatists captured Ulaangom in May 1912, but a 10,000-man Chinese army remained firmly entrenched in western Mongolia. The

Khutuktu (reincarnate lama) charged Hun Baldon, a ‘simple shepherd’ who was nonetheless ‘ferocious, absolutely without fear and possessing gigantic strength’, with capturing Khovd (also known as Kobdo), regional headquarters of the Chinese army. The Chinese fortress-headquarters looked impregnable to the poorly armed Mongols, with six-foot thick walls 12 feet high, surrounded by a moat filled with water from the nearby Buyant river. After several futile attacks against Chinese machine guns, an illustrious Kalmyk sorcerer and nationalist named Tushegoun Lama inspired the Mongols with mass hypnotic visions of the rich afterlife that awaited them should they fall in battle. On 6 August four detachments under Dandisureen, Magarjav, Gun Khaisan and Dambijantsen ‘fought furiously, perished by the hundreds but not before they had rushed into the heart of Kobdo’. It was the debut of Mongolia’s fledgling modern army. Hun Baldon’s force also liberated Uliastai in 1912, crashing through the gates of the Chinese fortress and torching the official quarters and barracks.<sup>106</sup>

In December 1911, the ruling nobility had decided to form a 20,000-man army with conscripts contributed from their domains. Their martial heritage notwithstanding, the *dojons* could not comprehend the urgency for a modern military, nor did they even make a serious effort to bring 20,000 men to arms. They contributed mostly ‘misfits and sick men’ to the new army, figuring that China was too distracted with her own affairs to attack and that anyway Russia would take care of Mongolia.<sup>107</sup> The questionable recruits were hastily trained, then half were rushed to the Chinese frontier and the other half to a reserve force around Urga. Only 2,000 men formed the ranks of the budding Mongolian army, organized into two cavalry regiments, a machine gun company and a four-gun artillery battery. The Mongolians’ awkwardness in modern military matters stands in stark contrast to the ruthless efficiency and mastery of their thirteenth-century predecessors.

In early 1912, Russia dispatched a colonel with a small military training mission to Urga under a one-year agreement with the new government. It was a difficult marriage of cultures trying to cast a reborn Mongolian army in the mold of the Russian Imperial army. The harshness of the Russian instructors and their insensitivity to cultural differences clashed with the Mongolians’ freedom-loving and relatively egalitarian steppe lifestyle and stunting backwardness. Ignoring the Mongolians’ unsurpassed expertise in horsemanship, the narrow-minded imperial officers stubbornly hammered their recruits with ceaseless infantry drills. Naturally the Mongolian conscripts began bucking the harsh regimen of the Russian training and the bitter taste of barracks life. Several deserted and one unit even mutinied against its Russian trainers, requiring Cossacks from the Legation Guard in Urga to quell the disturbance. By the time the mission’s one-year term was finished, the Russo-Mongolian courtship had soured so much that the training agreement was allowed to lapse. However, the suitors needed each other, and Russians continued to train Mongolian soldiers, but mission staffing was halved.<sup>108</sup>

In the meantime, diplomats concluded a secret agreement in early November 1912 that affirmed Mongolia’s autonomy from China and supported her right to establish her own army and expel China’s. A protocol to the agreement created a Russian protectorate over Outer Mongolia. Recognition of Mongolia’s independence came only from Tibet via a pact signed two weeks later that had been negotiated by the tireless Agvan Dorzhiev. Nevertheless, the following February Russia demonstrated her devotion with a 2 million-

ruble loan (about US\$1,000,000) for training and maintaining the new army. Apparently this sum was squandered because the Russians soon lent another 3 million rubles in a loan that came with a financial officer to oversee its use. The staff of the Russian consulate in Urga, established in 1860 to facilitate trade, was also bolstered to pursue decidedly non-commercial activities.<sup>109</sup>

### Ensign Grigorii Mikhailovich Semenov

A young imperial army *praporshik* (ensign) stood out from the Caucasian faces of the Russian officers in Urga in 1912. Grigorii Mikhailovich Semenov (СЕМЕHOB—pronounced sem-YO-nov) stood five feet nine inches tall, had mild blue eyes with the slightest hint of an Asiatic contour that revealed his Cossack-Buryat roots.<sup>110</sup> While an imperial officer of Cossack stock was not so common, an officer of mixed race was a novelty. The ensign's epaulets and his cocksure manner bore testimony to the youth's insatiable and undaunted ambition.

Semenov was born on 13 September 1890 at Post Kuranshi in the settlement of Durulguevskaya stanitsa, a village on the Onon river between Chita and Nerchinsk in the second department of the Transbaikal Cossack Host.<sup>111</sup> Semenov's face reflected the features of his Buryat mother, Evdokia Markovna Nizhegorodtseva, the daughter of a prominent local family.<sup>112</sup> Rumors claimed that she was a tribal princess. His Cossack father, Mikhail Petrovich Semenov, was a wealthy cattleman, a model farmer and agricultural innovator who was popular in his village and among neighboring Buryat and Mongol tribesmen, although he enjoyed 'no particular standing or influence' far beyond his *stanitsa*.<sup>113</sup> He ran a self-sufficient operation without many hired hands, was known for fielding McCormick harvesting machinery and other modern farm equipment and annually returned 250 to 300 *poods* (9,780 to 11,735 pounds) of meat to the government.<sup>114</sup>

Military service was a family tradition, of course, but in, contrast to most Cossack families where enlisted service was the norm, Semenov's family boasted a number of distinguished officers. At least one paternal uncle was a field officer and a second cousin, Dimitrii Frolovich Semenov, was destined to rise to the rank of major general.<sup>115</sup> Grigorii was 14 years old when his community was mobilized for service in the Russo-Japanese War. It turned out to be a dramatically formative emotional event for the teenager, who took the surrender of Port Arthur as a personal humiliation and thereafter dreamed of redeeming Russia's military glory.<sup>116</sup>

As a child, Semenov was imbued with a hunger for learning but, after two years attending the local settlers' school and then a school of limited capability in Mogotu, he was denied entry to the *gimnazia* (secondary school) in Chita. This denial is certainly evidence of his family's lack of social standing beyond his home village, which makes his subsequent achievements all the more remarkable. Grigorii Mikhailovich was educated at home, thanks to a large library assembled by his father. With a single-mindedness that would become his trademark, father and son aggressively rounded up precious books in this Transbaikal backwater and the student Semenov just as aggressively devoured them, especially when they concerned his favorite subjects: war, philosophy and religion. Despite the cultural isolation of his home, he developed a broad

range of interests, including, for example, paleontology and archaeology. As a teenager he worked on archaeological digs that recovered mammoth bones and fossil of prehistoric sea creatures for the Kuznetsov Museum in Chita. He also developed fluency in Buryat, Mongol and Kalmyk languages, learned a little English and of course became an expert horseman.<sup>117</sup>

The Transbaikal Cossack Host was one of the few Cossack hosts that did not have its own cadet corps. Thus, Semenov applied to the Orenburg Cossack Military School in 1908, passed a rigorous examination and was admitted in the autumn. Orenburg was a provincial capital of the Kazakh steppe, a crossroads between Europe and central Asia as a busy river-port on the Yaik and a major junction of a new railway that linked Tashkent and Turkestan to Russia. The growing city had been a center of the Kalmyk Cossacks since the eighteenth century. In addition, it was the hub of suppressed pan-Kyrgyz and Kazakh nationalist aspirations.<sup>118</sup> Perhaps this nourished dormant seeds of Buryat nationalism in Semenov's subconscious.

As a cadet he became known for 'remarkable physical toughness', and, though surrounded by children of the more privileged classes, he expressed pride in his peasant background. When chided by his fellow cadets about a newfound fascination with economics, Semenov declared, 'Do not forget that I am a peasant, and, for a peasant, economics is the one essential branch of learning.' During his three years in Orenburg, he came to consider himself an intellectual. In his academic life he demonstrated the ability to submerge himself completely in a subject to achieve mastery. He wrote poetry, broadened the scope of his voracious reading and was exposed to a structured academic regimen, new subjects, city life and different cultures.<sup>119</sup>

Upon graduation in August 1911, Semenov was commissioned an ensign and assigned to the 1st Verkhne-Udinsk Regiment of the Transbaikal Cossack Host at Troitskosavsk, on the frontier of Khalka Mongol territory.<sup>120</sup> His father had died earlier in the year but Grigorii Mikailovich's two elder brothers 'kept the household going' so that he could perform his military duties.<sup>121</sup> David Footman, a senior British intelligence official and Russian history scholar, surmised that Semenov 'left the Military School much as he had entered it', with 'great curiosity, a mass of ill-digested reading, an aversion to any form of discipline and only the sketchiest knowledge of educated society or of social usage'.<sup>122</sup> Historically, most officers in Cossack units were not Cossacks themselves and a 'good deal of prejudice' arose against those who were.<sup>123</sup> There had been strong opposition to commissioning Cossacks; they were considered ignorant and, given the rank and opportunity, likely to abandon themselves to 'all the vices of a parvenu'.<sup>124</sup> Most Cossacks who became officers were selected from the ranks based on heredity, intelligence and NCO tests. Semenov, as a graduate of the Orenburg military school, was a rare breed in the imperial officer corps.

After a mere three weeks in Troitskosavsk, Semenov, owing to his fluency in Mongol languages, was assigned to perform military topographical surveys that gave him a chance to travel from one end of Mongolia to the other during the turbulent period preceding the break from China. When he finished this task in early October 1911, he was posted to his regiment's 6th *sotnia* (a traditional Cossack unit of 100 men) which formed the consulate guard detachment in Urga.

Semenov could not help but notice that the city of Urga bore little resemblance to the European concept of a city, much less a capital, being mostly a sprawling, odiferous

assemblage of smoky yurts and animal pens. Yet, in autumn 1911, this dusty encampment was the capital of a rudimentary Mongolian nation and the focus of tribal politics for hundreds of miles in all directions. The Bogdo Khutuktu, visiting *doyons* and other leaders were pleasantly surprised to meet a sympathetic Russian officer who was as comfortable speaking Mongolian as he was speaking Russian, and could swallow a ladle of *tarasun* (fermented mare's milk) as easily as a glass of champagne. They flattered the young ensign by asking for his advice and assistance. Namsarai-Gun, an aspirant for the position of war minister in Urga's embryonic theocratic government, persuaded Semenov to translate Cossack regulations into Mongolian for the future national army.<sup>125</sup>

He was immediately drawn into the political intrigue and scheming that prevailed during Mongolia's first year of independence. 'Urga boiled in a whirlpool of political passions and new aspirations', wrote Semenov and he eagerly jumped right in. In December 1911, disorder swept through Urga's streets after Outer Mongolia's declaration of independence on the 11 December. The Russian Consul ordered Semenov and a small detail of Cossacks to rescue the Chinese *amban*, whose palace was on the verge of being sacked by an excited Mongolian mob. He not only rescued the *amban*, but, on his own initiative, deployed his troops to disarm and disperse the Chinese garrison, which, he said later in his own defense, was agitating the crowds and making a volatile situation worse.<sup>126</sup> Soon after that, his platoon raced over to the Daitsin Bank in Mai-mai chên, Urga's Chinese quarter, where they prevented a violent robbery.<sup>127</sup> Semenov discovered the power and influence that even a young ensign could wield upon events and subsequently received cables and gifts of gratitude for restoring order in the city. The Daitsin Bank lavished gifts upon Semenov, giving him 5,000 lan in cash, a 4-*pood tsibik* of 'fragrant tea' (a bale sewn into a raw bull hide), swaths of silk and 'ten well-fed bulls', all of which he contributed to the 'collective property' of his *sotnia*. Unfortunately, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs deemed that Semenov's actions constituted meddling in China's internal affairs and had compromised Russian neutrality. Therefore, for exceeding his orders, the Russian Consul demanded the young ensign's recall after just four months in Urga and gave him 48 hours to leave the city.<sup>128</sup>

Semenov turned his recall back to Russia into a triumph of sorts. He set a mid-winter speed record for the 232-mile journey from Urga to Kyakhta, riding relays of horses provided by his Mongolian friends to arrive in 26 hours. Such an accomplishment did not go unnoticed in a country where everyone above the age of 5 was a skilled equestrian. An investigation by the Irkutsk Military District into Semenov's actions in Urga was thwarted by his regimental commander (a 'brilliant officer' in the accused ensign's eyes), Colonel Baron Artur Arturovich Keller.<sup>129</sup>

The next two years passed like the quiet before the storm. Semenov yearned to return to Mongolia, and his Mongolian friends, now high officials, petitioned the Russian government to second Semenov to Urga to help organize their new national army. Semenov's superiors, wary of aggravating the thin-skinned foreign affairs bureaucrats, endeavored to keep him away from Mongolian intrigue. 'Bad luck followed him and he was obliged to be transferred often from one regiment to another', declared a sympathetic biography published years later, which suggested that he was scapegoated by unethical superiors. 'His morally tender soul could not agree with the many dark sides of modern military life and he protested against every injustice and always told the blunt truth.'<sup>130</sup> For a short spell he served in a little artillery battery in Troitskosavsk, then in a military

school in Chita, and then on border duty with the 1st Nerchinsk Regiment (of the Transbaikalian Cossack Army) along the Ussuri river. There at the far edge of the empire in the Maritime Province, Semenov got his first taste of guerrilla warfare hunting clever bands of *hunghtze* (Manchurian bandits), and he learned many a nook and cranny of the Chinese-Russian border area, tactical knowledge that would come in handy years later. He also married a girl named Zenaida and fathered a son, Vyacheslav, but any domestic life was soon to be doomed by the clouds of war gathering over Europe.<sup>131</sup>

Russia soon had second thoughts about her hastiness in plunging so deeply into Mongolian affairs. In the tit-for-tat of great power geopolitics, Russian pressure on Mongolia was bound to result in counterpressure from Britain elsewhere (probably Persia, where both Russian bear and British lion sniffed oil). With this in mind, just one year after Russia and Mongolia formalized their vows to one another, the relationship was dampened by the Sino-Russian Declaration of 5 November 1913. Russia recognized China's preeminence over Mongolia and, in return, China's new republican government promised Mongolia the right to self-rule and control over her own commerce and industry. Most importantly, China pledged not to send troops into Mongolia.

By the end of 1914, Russia's military mission to Mongolia had been recalled, but the Sino-Russian Declaration had little to do with it. Earthier issues compelled the withdrawal: continuing friction between Russian advisors and Mongolian students had bred irreconcilable resentment and, in spite of the Sino-Russian Declaration, Mongolia's naive leaders still had a lackadaisical attitude towards building the army. Regardless, in August 1914, Russia's interest shifted to the Great War and thousands of miles of war fronts arcing from the Baltic Sea to Azerbaijan.

### Semenov in the Great War

On 4 August 1914, Cossacks, their families, railway employees and villagers of Grodekovo gathered to hear a colonel read aloud the mobilization telegram that meant war with the Central Powers—Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. The crowd roared a loud 'hurrah' for Tsar Nicholas and the border village packed up its fathers and sons and put them aboard trains to Europe in mid-month. Their cross-country train ride at harvest time, as the 'fields and woods of Siberia donned the gold brocade of autumn', filled them with pride. A three-day stopover in Moscow gave them their first taste of a metropolis and they took advantage of free tram rides for soldiers to sightsee. Semenov walked with three Buryat soldiers to the Kremlin, where they encountered a trio of European Russians who refused to believe that they were not Japanese. Their fellow citizens in Moscow had never heard of Buryats, and had no idea that they were part of the Tsar's domain.<sup>132</sup>

The regiment disembarked in Poland and Semenov received his baptism of fire in operations west of the massive citadel of Novo Georgievsk, defending Warsaw against Austro-Hungarian attacks in September and German assaults in October.<sup>133</sup> While leading a reconnaissance mission northwest of Novo Georgievsk, Semenov's *sotnia* crossed paths with a German patrol and he personally captured two Germans. The brigade commander, Major General Kiselev, congratulated Semenov for snagging the 'first trophies' of the war for both his regiment and brigade.<sup>134</sup>

Semenov built a reputation for courage under fire and quick thinking, proving himself a bold leader of small raiding and reconnaissance units. On 11 November 1914, Uhlans of a Prussian regiment captured the brigade baggage train—150 transport vehicles including ammunition of the artillery battalion, the regimental flag of the 1st Nerchinsk Regiment and 400 Russian soldiers. *Khorunzhi* (Sublieutenant) Semenov was returning to base from an overnight reconnaissance with nine Cossacks and did not realize that his brigade had moved on ahead without him and the now-captured baggage column until a breathless, half-dressed rider galloped up with the news. Semenov followed the sound of desultory gunshots and brashly spurred his little party into a gathered squadron of dismounted Uhlans, scattering their horses and creating a panic. Remarkably, Semenov achieved such surprise that alarm spread through two adjacent German squadrons. Displaying his best Mongol horsemanship, Semenov led his Cossacks right through the German column. Not realizing the size of the Russian threat and startled by the sheer audacity of the Russian attack, a whole German cavalry brigade began a sloppy withdrawal that turned into a hasty retreat and the captured Russian baggage train was discarded in the rush to get away.

For this deed, Semenov was decorated with the Order of St George, 4th Class. Three weeks later, he led 11 men in an overrun of a Bavarian infantry outpost, taking 55 prisoners. That feat earned him another Cross of St George.<sup>135</sup> Semenov was a modern-day *bagatur* who excelled in practical combat skills and reveled in war.

After ten months on the Polish Front, the Ussuri Division was moved to the Northern Front near Dvinsk, then shifted to Riga. Here in 1915, Semenov participated in two daring raids in the extreme rear of the enemy which—according to Semenov's earliest biographer, Borisov—wreaked such havoc that 'afterwards the name of the "yellow [Buryat] Cossacks" induced horror' amongst the Germans. The Ussuri Division moved south into the Carpathian Mountains to support the Brusilov offensive, which was launched in summer 1916. Semenov distinguished himself in a breakthrough around Chernovitz, and in a raid into Hungary itself, in the heart of hostile territory. In another instance, when isolated in mountainous terrain, Semenov showed exceptional heroism in leading 40 Cossacks in the defense of a critical pass, repelling four attacks with hand grenades.<sup>136</sup> His exploits earned him a warrior's reputation among senior officers, and he eventually came to the attention of General A.M.Krymov, the corps commander, who promoted him to *pod'esaul* (junior captain). At one time Semenov was entrusted with command of a detachment befitting a colonel, consisting of two infantry companies, four Cossack sotnias and a section of artillery.

Semenov's leadership of the 5th Squadron of the 1st Nerchinsk Regiment during the winter of 1916 attracted the eye of General Baron Petr Nikolaevich Vrangl. Vrangl later wrote,

Semenov was...dark and thickset, and of the rather alert Mongolian type. His intelligence was of a specifically Cossack calibre, and he was an exemplary soldier, especially courageous when under the eye of his superior. He knew how to make himself popular with Cossacks and officers alike, but he had his weaknesses—a love of intrigue and indifference to the means by which he achieved his ends. Though capable and ingenious, he had received no education, and his outlook was narrow.

I have never been able to understand how he came to play a leading role [in the civil war].<sup>137</sup>

Of course, Vrangl was wrong about Semenov having received no education, but the statement hints at a coarseness in Semenov's character that his limited education in the Orenburg military academy could not smooth over.

It was on Vrangl's Galician Front that Semenov cemented his friendship with Baron Roman Fedorovich von Ungern-Shternberg, commander of the 1st Nerchinsk Regiment's 6th Squadron. Ungern-Shternberg was a pale wisp of a man with reddish blonde hair, darting blue eyes and small head dominated by an oversized forehead, who shared Semenov's reputation as a courageous combat leader and mutual interests in central Asian people, history and religion. He claimed the bloodline of a warrior caste that dated to Attila the Hun, and recited a litany of fighting Ungerns including one killed 'under the walls of Jerusalem' during an early Crusade, 11-year-old Ralph Ungern who perished during the Children's Crusade, Baron Halsa Ungern-Shternberg of the twelfth-century Order of Teutons, two more Teutonic Ungerns slain by Polish and Lithuanian troops in the Grünwald, a sixteenth-century gladiator named Heinrich 'the Axe' Ungern von Shternberg, Baltic pirates Ralph and Peter, and eighteenth-century alchemist Wilhelm Ungern. He was the descendant of a notorious 'sea robber', Count Otto Reinhold Ludwig von Ungern-Shternberg, who moved from a plantation near the village of Vana-Kuuste, Estonia, to the Baltic isle of Hiiumaa in 1772, where he set fires to lure ships onto the shoals so he could plunder them, even though he owned several estates. In 1804, the count was convicted of piracy and the murder of a Swedish skipper, and banished to Tomsk where he 'built a Lutheran church, perused books on economics and flying machines, [and] wrote touching letters to his wife, round which he painted garlands of forget-me-nots'. Roman Ungern-Shternberg claimed that his grandfather was an Indian Ocean privateer who extorted tribute from English traders until he was captured, handed over to the Russian Consul and deported to Transbaikalia.<sup>138</sup> He credited this ancestor for introducing him to Buddhism.

Ungern-Shternberg's background is clouded by different versions. It seems that he was born in the Austrian city of Graz on 29 December 1885, while his parents were traveling through Europe, and grew up in Revel (now Tallinn).<sup>139</sup> In 1921, he told Ferdinand Ossendowski, 'I am also a naval officer but the Russo-Japanese War forced me to leave my regular profession to join and fight with the Transbaikal Cossacks.' Baron Vrangl related a slightly different version. As a teenager Ungern dropped out of school to fight as an infantryman during the Russo-Japanese War, being wounded and decorated for valor. After the war, his relatives pressured him into military school and, noted Vrangl, 'He passed his officers' examinations only with great difficulty.' He chose assignment to a Cossack regiment in Siberia where he was struck on the head with a saber during a drunken quarrel. The latter 'undoubtedly upset his mental balance...for the rest of his life'. He left his regiment and, with a small rifle, hunting dog and horse, set out from Vladivostok for a year-long hunting and camping expedition that ended in Harbin. When war broke out between China and Outer Mongolia in 1912, Ungern-Shternberg rushed to offer his services to the Mongols and, according to Vrangl, became 'commander of the whole cavalry force of Mongolia!'<sup>140</sup> An updated version states that Ungern became a naval cadet in St Petersburg in 1896, served as an infantryman on the

Manchurian front during the Russo-Japanese War, then attended the elite Pavlovsk infantry school and was commissioned into the Transbaikal Cossacks in 1908. On a bet with his fellow officers, he made a 400-mile journey across the wild taiga from Dauria, near Russia's frontier with Mongolia, to Blagoveshchensk on the Amur river, equipped with only a horse, rifle and cartridges. Like Semenov, he served in some nebulous capacity in Mongolia, allegedly fighting the Chinese around Kobdo in 1913, and became enamored of the culture and spirituality.<sup>141</sup>

Ungern-Shternberg maintained that he had dedicated much time to 'the study and learning of Buddhism', and during the pre-war years, he founded an Order of Military Buddhists, into which Semenov and a number of other Transbaikal Cossack officers were drawn. 'I gathered round me and developed 300 men wholly bold and entirely ferocious', he told Ossendowski. Ungern's regimen for spiritual development entailed celibacy and 'the limitless use of alcohol, hashish and opium' to produce fighting men who became 'heroes in the war with Germany', or so he claimed.<sup>142</sup> In any event, the bond between Semenov and Ungern sprouted before the First World War, was shaped by Ungern's mysterious clan and forged in combat on the Eastern Front.

Ungern-Shternberg joined the Nerchinsk regiment at the beginning of the First World War, served in East Prussia and, like Semenov, distinguished himself early on as a daring leader of raiding parties behind the Austro-Hungarian lines in Galicia and the Carpathians. Wounded several times, he earned the St George Cross, Russia's highest decoration for bravery. To his fellow Russian officers, he was an eccentric who 'turned up his nose at discipline, and was ignorant of the rudiments of decency and decorum... He was dirty and dressed untidily, slept on the floor with his Cossacks, and messed with them'. Vrangl himself tried to convince Ungern-Shternberg to affect some semblance of military bearing—to adopt 'at least the external appearance of an officer'—to no avail.<sup>143</sup>

The coincidence of Ungern-Shternberg and Semenov's experiences in Mongolia, their passion for war, their unconventional paths into the officers' corps, and camaraderie on the frontlines bound them closer than brothers. The mere occurrence of their friendship is fertile ground for advanced psychological study: two brash and remarkably successful outsiders in the ultra-conservative and restricted fraternity of the Russian officer corps, tolerated only because the dire necessity of war made them indispensable. As Vrangl wrote, 'He [Ungern-Shternberg] was of the type that is invaluable in wartime and impossible in times of peace.' The same could be said of Semenov.

January 1917 found Semenov in command of the 3rd *sotnia* of the 3rd Verkhne-Udinsk Regiment in the mountains cradling Lake Urmia in northwestern Persia, holding the Turks while General N.N. Baratov advanced across the Mesopotamian plain to link up with Lieutenant General Sir Frederick Stanley Maude's British expeditionary force.<sup>144</sup> It was a forgotten theatre of war compared to the grand fronts across Flanders and Galicia, but no less vicious.

In the opening moves of the war, General Baratov had advanced into northern Persia and engaged a Turkish army under Hussein Raouf Bey, while the British landed at Basra and moved north to secure the Anglo-Persian Oil Company's pipeline.<sup>145</sup> In northwestern Persia, the Russians armed a number of Christian communities of Assyrians and Armenians and drafted men for military service. Then, tragically, on 1 January 1915, the Russians abruptly withdrew their 2,000 troops from Lake Urmia as Khalil Pasha's 1st Turkish Corps drew near. Thousands of frightened Assyrian and Armenian families tried

desperately to keep up with the retreating troops.<sup>146</sup> All Christians were now branded as traitors, and any caught behind the Turkish lines were liable to be savaged by Turkish troops and their Kurdish auxiliaries in a cruel jihad sweeping Asia Minor. Many Kurdish families sheltered fleeing friends, but did so knowing that they could meet a terrible fate if discovered by Turkish authorities or informers.<sup>147</sup> Thousands of refugees sought protection in US missionary stations, but many more perished in a wave of genocide that hemorrhaged throughout the region for several months. The Russians recovered the area in the summer, but abandoned it again in early August 1915, when the genocide began anew.<sup>148</sup>

In November 1915, during General Sir John Nixon's ambitious effort to conquer Baghdad, link up with the Russians and sever Persia from the Ottoman torso, the British 6th Poona Division suffered a startling defeat at Ctesiphon. The division's epic retreat was cut off and it was besieged at Kut al-Amara, a grubby hamlet squatting in a bend of the Tigris river. During the next four months, 23,000 British Commonwealth soldiers perished trying to relieve the 13,000 men at Kut. Baratov advanced deep into Persia to help his allies, forcing the Turks to withdraw a corps of their 6th Army from the siege, but in vain. With starvation looming, the Poona Division finally capitulated to Khalil Pasha on 29 April 1916. Turkish captors sadistically butchered more than 2,000 of the soldiers who had surrendered.<sup>149</sup>

After Kut, Khalil Pasha turned his attention to the Russians and halted their southward advance in June 1916, but again relinquished the mountains around Lake Urmia to Baratov. By January 1917, when Semenov and the Transbaikal Cossacks arrived in the area, the Ottoman jihad had disfigured the landscape with scorched villages, wells stuffed with decaying corpses, meadows littered with human bones and tufts of drifting hair, gorges lined with mummified cadavers of the menfolk, and river banks coughing up the swollen remains of children. The countless crime scenes of brutal, individual murders contrasted sharply in scale and emotion with the endless fields of mass slaughter wrought by machine guns and artillery on the Eastern Front. Gaunt survivors, Assyrian and Armenian men and boys for the most part, weakened by typhoid and hunger, stumbled out of the hills to hail the Cossacks as saviors and beg for food. Girls and women were few and far between; most had been gang-raped and carted off to slavery in neighboring Muslim villages.

Semenov's impressions of Urmia's hellish surroundings are unknown, although the scene was certainly impossible to ignore. In Gulpashan, the ghostly town where the 3rd Verkhne-Udinsk Regiment eventually made camp, a single grave containing 51 bludgeoned elders served as a reminder of the recent blood-orgy.<sup>150</sup> Nevertheless, the Buryat Cossack warrior was pleased to be campaigning where Alexander the Great and Emperor Darius had marched centuries before. He also enjoyed the companionship of Baron Ungern-Shternberg. Ungern-Shternberg came up with the idea of raising an army from the Assyrians around Lake Urmia, a notion that evolved into Semenov's scheme for an all-Buryat regiment and further entwined their fates.<sup>151</sup>

In March 1917, General Baratov's vanguard linked up with the British northeast of Baghdad. At the time, Maurice Paléologue, the French Ambassador in Petrograd, lauded the Imperial Army's Mesopotamian Campaign, 'In the general schemes of the war, this brilliant operation is obviously but an episode; but quite possibly it is the last exploit which historians will have to record in the military annals of Russia.'<sup>152</sup> Apart from

Mesopotamia, it seemed that Russia and the Imperial Army were coming apart at the seams.

Since 1916, a slow, irreversible rot had eroded morale in the Russian Army. The Great War had consumed nearly one-quarter of Russia's male workforce: an estimated 4,500,000 men had been killed or disabled, and more than 2 million others languished in prison camps in Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria. 'Too often the Russian infantryman had been called on to retake with blood what the German had taken with high explosive, and by the beginning of 1917, there was little blood left.'<sup>153</sup>

On 8 March the soldiers' wives, mothers and sisters unwittingly ignited the February Revolution with the simple spark of an innocuous Petrograd procession to mark International Woman's Day. That innocent procession bred a spate of ill-planned strikes by 90,000 workers the next day. Although revolutionary committees and police planning teams had been preparing for this moment for years, with both sides intent on improving their 1905 performances, their blueprints and timetables for carefully calculated movements and actions did not take into account the emotions of the mounted Cossacks on Sampsonievskii Prospekt when ordered to stampede through 2,500 Erikson millworkers on the cold morning of 10 March 1917. First with a wink, then with the flash of a smile, the Cossacks signalled the crowd that they would neither attack the workers nor flagrantly disobey their officers. When their flustered officers formed a wall of Cossacks to block the street, the men stood 'stock-still in perfect discipline', not allowing their horses to stir while demonstrators squeezed between their legs. 'The revolution...made its first steps toward victory under the belly of a Cossack's horse', wrote Trotsky. Stories about sympathetic Cossacks inspired the dark masses in the streets: the Cossacks who chased away policemen that had flogged a woman marcher, Cossacks who whispered promises not to shoot, Cossacks who fired on police that shot into a crowd at the Alexander III monument... 'It seems that the break in the army first appeared among the Cossacks, those age-old subduers and punishers', smirked Trotsky, who had little love for them. Spontaneous strikes punctuated by demands for bread and peace jammed the city, unleashing pent-up hatreds and frustrations that had been suppressed by tsarist police for more than 20 years. Cossacks sent to subdue demonstrators joined them, and mutiny spread through Petrograd's 150,000-man garrison like an epidemic.<sup>154</sup>

Suddenly the hated police abandoned some areas of the city and the old order just seemed to collapse. The provisional government and Petrograd Soviet emerged from the shadows, each competing to fill the vacuum. On 14 March 1917, *Izvestia* published Military Order No. 1, a decree of the Petrograd soviet which undermined military discipline by transferring authority from officers to individual units' soldiers' committees of men elected from the ranks.<sup>155</sup> Upon hearing that he had been forsaken by his beloved army, a melancholy Tsar Nicholas II abdicated the throne aboard the imperial train at Pskov station on the night of 15 March 1917. In subsequent weeks hundreds of thousands of men deserted the army, clogging the roads and hanging from packed trains.<sup>156</sup> Whole regiments mutinied en masse. The largely illiterate soldiery arrested and often murdered unsympathetic officers. Some officers went into hiding, and others reluctantly feigned solidarity with the soldiers' committees.

It took several days before the collapse of the military chain of command was felt by the 3rd Verkhne-Udinsk Regiment and the nearby 2nd Argun and 2nd Chita Regiments,

but while Order No. 1 caused confusion, anarchist and Red agitators eventually stirred up dissension in the previously cohesive Cossack ranks.<sup>157</sup> Semenov was emotionally untouched by the tsar's abdication; 'his loyalties were to the Russian Empire, not to the Imperial House'.<sup>158</sup> They were at Gulpashan when a soldiers' committee took over the regiment in March and held elections for commander. Semenov won, although he did not seek election. Not only that, but he was elected Deputy of the 1st Nerchinsk Regiment, as well. He refused both positions, saying that there was no time for such activities on the field of battle.<sup>159</sup> Semenov could not fathom abandonment of the struggle that had consumed his energies and the lives of so many comrades for two and a half years.

Likewise, the provisional government refused to abandon the war. Despite the disastrous state of the armed forces—indeed, naively unaware of the extent of it, Alexander F. Kerensky, the inexperienced and vain socialist lawyer who became Minister of War in mid-May, refused to back down from a promise to the Allies to launch a massive offensive in summer 1917 to divert Central Powers pressure away from France. Kerensky believed that he could bolster the front with new regiments composed of indigenous people of Siberia, Transcaucasia and central Asia. Nearly 10 million men of military age in non-Christian minorities were not subject to the military draft.<sup>160</sup> However, such a desperate recruiting scheme presented some risks. A decree dated 25 June 1916 calling up Kazakhs for duty in the rear led to uprisings and a sudden Kazakh emigration to China's Sinkiang province.<sup>161</sup>

Semenov, drawing from Ungern-Shternberg's idea for an Assyrian Army in April 1917, drew up a proposal for an all-Buryat regiment and sent it to Petrograd in May 1917.<sup>162</sup> The proposal struck a responsive chord among the wishful thinkers in the provisional government and War Ministry officials who realized the army's dire need for men willing to fight and immediately summoned Semenov to the capital. About this time, the 2nd Cossack Corps was disbanded and Semenov was ordered back to the Ussuri Brigade, so, one way or another, Semenov was leaving his regiment.<sup>163</sup>

He arrived in Petrograd on 8 June, which, in the three months since Citizen Nicholas Romanov signed his abdication letter, had degenerated like a grande dame gone to seed. Its streets were strewn with stinking garbage, rife with crime since the dismissal of most police weeks before, and full of raucous soldiers—more than 100,000 of them, garrison troops and deserters who had come to 'defend the revolution' and carouse.<sup>164</sup> Luckily he befriended a naval officer, one Lieutenant Ul'rich, who invited Semenov to stay in his apartment on Vasil'evskii Island and filled him in on the revolutionary insanity that had brought Russia's capital to her knees.<sup>165</sup> The chaos irked Semenov.

With some difficulty he found the All-Russia Revolutionary Committee for the Formation of the Volunteer Army in a small office on the second floor of No. 20 Moika Street and reported to Colonel Murav'ev. For two weeks he reported each morning at 9 a.m., making his way through the uncouth hooligans in muddled uniforms loitering amidst the rubbish, rubbing shoulders with senior Bolsheviks on the sidewalks, and getting a taste of the complex societal changes the revolution promised for Russia. It was a taste that sickened and infuriated him. He proposed a coup to install General Brusilov and offered to arrest the members of the Petrograd Soviet—the proletarian sirens who had seduced his army—and shoot them all. Semenov was not joking. Murav'ev—perhaps even War

Minister Kerensky himself—refused the offers, but listened with interest to his proposal to raise a new regiment in Transbaikalia.<sup>166</sup> On 26 July Semenov boarded a train bound for the Far East, entrusted with 60,000 rubles, the title of Military Commissar and the authority to create a Mongol-Buryat regiment.<sup>167</sup> The exact sanction and responsibilities that came with this title were vague, though Semenov suggested that he carried the Petrograd soviet's 'full authority' for all military matters in the Irkutsk and Pri-Amur (*Primor-skaya*—Maritime and Amur provinces) military districts and the Chinese Eastern Railway zone.<sup>168</sup>

### Commissar Semenov

Semenov's train pulled him away from the Great War just as his Russian Army gasped its last breath on Kerensky's ill-conceived summer offensive. On 29 June, 31 divisions charged into the German armies threatening Riga and Petrograd. Although backed up by 1,000 artillery pieces and months of staff planning, their advance stalled within 72 hours, three days before the southern offensive started against the Austro-Hungarian line in Galicia on 3 July. By 26, July when Semenov traveled east, the trains were bulging with deserters from the front.

The disastrous offensive produced more mutinies than victories.<sup>169</sup> Since the tsar's abdication, many army units had fallen under the control of soldiers' soviets, which insisted on voting whether or not to obey any particular order from above. A German-led counteroffensive tore into the Russian lines just as the equally devastating news of an unsuccessful Bolshevik coup d'état against the provisional government swept through the ranks in mid-July. Discipline and morale in the Russian ranks evaporated, but, to the soldiers' credit, not as fast as had their rifles and ammunition. Months of staff planning still could not provide something so basic as a rifle in the hands of each infantryman who was expected to run at the German machine guns. Meanwhile, 2 million tons of military supplies sat on the docks of Archangel and Murmansk, and even more at Vladivostok.

As the Central Powers gained the upper hand in battle, the Russians began melting away so fast that 300,000 new soldiers were needed every month to fill gaps in the porous 2,000-mile front that snaked from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. No recruitment was possible amid the bread riots and strikes in the cities of European Russia where streets teemed with deserters and revolutionary agitators. Semenov's mission took on added urgency if Kerensky, who became Prime Minister on 22 July, intended to keep up the war effort.

Russia was drunk with its first taste of weak democracy. Joyous anarchy reigned in every city and town along the railway. Fluttering banners of a plethora of political parties trumpeted intoxicating concepts of freedom and equality that few peasants comprehend, much less read, though many could parrot the words of *Rabochaya Marsel'ezha*—the Russified 'Workers' *Marseillaise*'. No more tsarist insignia—the Romanov dynasty's double-headed eagles, nor haughty policemen, nor shuffling columns of chained convicts were to be seen. All symbols of the old authority had become objects of scorn or targets of violence. As Semenov's train wheezed over the Urals into Siberia, the revolutionary fever seemed to lessen. Yet even in Siberia's dreary towns and villages, red activists spread the revolutionary contagion among the colorful mix of hardy Russian

frontiersmen, entrepreneurs, recently released convicts and exiles, native traders garbed in skins jingling with amulets, Mongols, Chinese, prospectors, adventurers and fugitives from all corners of Eurasia. All around Semenov, on the train and on the platforms of stations big and small, loitered deserters on their way home to claim or forcibly take a plot of land from the nearest estate. In better times, the decorations on Semenov's chest and the German bullets embedded in his shoulder would have marked him as a hero. But in the dizzy days of revolutionary fervor, such badges of valor meant little. His epaulets only marked him as a suspect in the eyes of many soldiers, who considered every officer a reactionary. Most soldiers refused to salute anymore, and addressed officers like everyone else, '*Továrishch!* Comrade!'<sup>170</sup>

On 1 August Semenov debarked in Irkutsk and called on Major General Samarin and his assistant, Colonel Krakovetskii, at the Irkutsk Military District headquarters. After four days of coordination with Samarin's staff, he took the overnight Siberian express to Chita, arriving on the morning of 6 August, and proceeded to the contentious Transbaikal Cossack Host *krug*, the decision-making assembly of the Cossack community. Semenov worked closely with the president of the congress, Sergei Afanas' evich Taskin, who had been Transbaikalia's representative to the national *duma*, and Taskin's assistant, Major General I.F. Shil'nikov, to preserve the traditional character of the Transbaikal Cossack Host, which was under attack by revolutionary representatives.<sup>171</sup>

The Transbaikal Cossack Host was not only a military organization, but the dominant social, political and economic force in Transbaikalia. In 1914 it encompassed 255,000 people living in 63 *stanitsa* areas with 516 satellite settlements, all divided into four regional administrative departments that competed for influence and resources within the host. They were one of the primary economic engines of Transbaikalia, generating income and taxes from agriculture, cattle and horse breeding, and cross-border trade with China, as well as smuggling and industrial enterprises. As with Russia's other Cossack hosts, in exchange for their military service to the state, they enjoyed their own public health and educational systems, a separate tax structure and a variety of opportunities that were unavailable to the grey masses of peasants and workers.<sup>172</sup>

Semenov proposed that a fifth all-Buryat and Mongol department be created, but the *krug* became distracted by more compelling revolutionary issues.<sup>173</sup> Since the February Revolution members of the Host's third and fourth departments had been crowing about disbanding the Transbaikal Cossack Host altogether as an unjust remnant of the old regime. The third and fourth departments occupied eastern Transbaikal regions populated by descendents of peasant miners who had been easily radicalized by revolutionary idealism. The first and second departments, which had larger Buryat and Mongol constituencies, were situated in western Transbaikalia and became labeled the *karaul'tsy*—the 'old guard'.<sup>174</sup> Their differences polarized the Transbaikal Cossacks and deepened during the heated debates of the August 1917 *krug* in Chita's Mariinskii Theatre. This estrangement would fester as the months passed and traditionalists struggled to preserve their way of life while revolutionaries pushed to usher in a new socialist era. Another estrangement also cast its shadow over Semenov's life at this time. He sent for his wife, Zenaida, to return to Siberia from south Russia, but she would not—or could not—come.<sup>175</sup>

Semenov soon departed for a Buryat congress in Verkhne-Udinsk, the city of 30,000 sprawling across rolling hills of pine above the confluence of the Selenga and Uda

Rivers. The Selenga paralleled the main street, defined by the railway station at the north end and a modest cathedral at the south. In between, three more churches and several chapels stood as reminders of the waning power of Russian Orthodox priests. The Nicholas Memorial Arch was now the object of derision or sympathy, around which was clustered the London Hotel, post and telegraph office, and north end of the shopping district. Pungent aromas wafted out of a brewery and several tanneries, candle shops and soap factories. Weather-beaten wooden houses rose out of a gridiron of wide, sandy streets like stubby shadows of the surrounding Ulan-Burgasy and Yablonovy mountains. A bazaar in the center of town was lined with little shops run by Jews banished from European Russia. One wealthy merchant, Gdali Itzkovich and his six sons owned and operated silk, leather, soap and shoe factories as well as a well-stocked department store that employed 30 workers.<sup>176</sup> Yet the richest merchant was a Mr Zgelnitski, ‘merchant, automobile owner, capitalist’. The local economy revolved around Tea Road trade and wool—some 75,000 tons were harvested annually between the city and Lake Baikal, but was retarded by troublesome currency problems. The only currency in circulation were 50-ruble banknotes that had been printed by the Bolsheviks and had to be individually registered, numbered and rubber-stamped by the banks to guarantee payment, with chits used for smaller denominations.<sup>177</sup> Camel caravans from Mongolia, exhausted by the 40-day cross-desert trek from Kalgan (now Changchia Kow, China), paused here in the summer to trade.<sup>178</sup> The streets’ poplars and green-berried *cheromki* may have stirred a pre-war memory among returning soldiers, but the town was vastly different now.

Inflation was felt in the astronomical price of tobacco, and war shortages caused a scarcity of staples like sugar. In almost all occupations, even dirty, back-breaking work in the railway shops, women performed the jobs of men who had been called into army service. The place was swollen with troops returning from the front. A Soviet of Workers and Soldiers had evicted the top ranks of the imperial bureaucracy just after the tsar’s abdication in March and now governed the town through an Executive Committee of Public Organizations. Similar committees of soldiers, peasants, workers and other citizens had already taken over the administrations of most Russian towns and cities.

Most of the railway men and troops who composed the Verkhne-Udinsk soviet were not Bolsheviks, though agents of the Bolshevik party sat among them. A cell of the formerly illegal Social Democratic Labor party, the parent organization of Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, had been formed in Verkhne-Udinsk in 1902. Most of the Soviet leaned toward either the Menshevik party or the Socialist-Revolutionary party, the latter being the most popular political organization in Siberia despite the fact that the *Eser* (SR) label had been appropriated by so many that it came ‘to connote little more than general support of the Provisional Government’.<sup>179</sup> The Socialist-Revolutionaries were far from united in their beliefs and political endeavors, but they generally agreed that a Constituent Assembly should be democratically elected to rule the land. Many of them strongly supported an autonomous Siberia, and some bent towards extremist policies that mirrored Bolshevik demands, such as a radical redistribution of wealth.<sup>180</sup> On the other hand, Siberia’s Socialist-Revolutionary constituency focused on a markedly different agenda from that of their European kin. ‘The [Siberian] peasants were not cowed drudges, eking out a dull existence on cramped plots of land’, wrote Peter Fleming, ‘they resembled, rather, pioneer settlers, and their farms, averaging a hundred acres, were ten times the

size of their counterparts in European Russia.<sup>181</sup> Some moderate Socialist-Revolutionary factions even advocated staying in the war against Germany and Austria-Hungary.

Siberian Russians were less prone than their European brethren to prefer peace at any price when they believed that an honorable peace could still be sought on the battlefield. Many believed the widespread disinformation about the Bolsheviks' alleged collusion with the German Kaiser and considered Lenin and his associates to be traitors. Nevertheless, Semenov's recruiting mission in Verkhne-Udinsk and other locales in Transbaikalia would not be easy. People were sick of war and numbed by the endless political tirades in the gritty streets. Even patriotic Russians now dreaded military service and no one wanted to be at the front when the government might begin distributing land.

In Verkhne-Udinsk, Semenov convinced a five-day conference of southern Transbaikal Buryats to accept his proposal for a Mongol-Buryat regiment.<sup>182</sup> From there he traveled around the province meeting with local military and civil authorities and holding rallies to convince Cossacks and Buryats to join his hollow regiment. The provincial commissar appealed to district commissars to render assistance, specifically lodging and grain, to 'Commissar *Pod'esaul* V.V.Semenov, representative of the Central Committee of the Organization of the Volunteer Revolutionary Army'.<sup>183</sup> Before the long, hot summer days of August 1917 passed, frost was already glazing the meadows of Transbaikalia but Semenov's ranks were still largely vacant. By the end of September he opened recruitment to anyone, not just Buryats and Mongols.<sup>184</sup>

Undaunted by the lethargy he encountered in Transbaikalia, Semenov called on old friends from his 1912 assignment in Urga and arranged secret meetings with chiefs across the frontier in Outer Mongolia.<sup>185</sup> This foreign intrigue clearly exceeded the scope of his orders from Petrograd but he recognized a rich source of recruits among the Mongols, many of whom realized that their fragile autonomy, promised by the 1915 tripartite Treaty of Kyakhta, was really guaranteed by the Russian Army.

Even so, Semenov's Mongol-Buryat regiment was slow to materialize. As the chill of approaching autumn sharpened, people's moods grew gloomier. Families feared for loved ones gone to the front, whence came no good news. Prices kept rising, and fewer goods appeared on store shelves. Mobilization of horses made the provisional government no new friends. The lower classes became enchanted by slogans of radical socialists. Wealthy and conservative citizens discreetly formed leagues to defend their threatened interests. New faces began to emerge on town and regional soviets in Transbaikalia—political organizers from European Russia with no bonds to local communities. Under these circumstances it seems remarkable that Semenov was able to enlist anyone, yet somehow he managed to entice more than a handful of Cossacks into the ranks.<sup>186</sup>

At the end of August 1917, distrust boiled over into violence between Kerensky and his supreme commander, the heroic Siberian Cossack General Lavr Kornilov. General Krymov and his 3rd Cavalry Corps marched on Petrograd to support Kornilov and defend the provisional government and ran up against revolutionary troops who were marching to *defeat* Kornilov and defend the provisional government. The ensuing confusion among the troops turned to fraternization, and, hours later, after a shouting match with Kerensky, Krymov, Semenov's former commander and mentor, penned a letter to his wife, turned his revolver to his chest and committed suicide. A total of 25,000 bolshevized soldiers sprang to Kerensky's defense while their radical brethren throughout the army declared a hunting season on officers. 'The Germans were at Riga, and the Russians were busying