

AN EPISODE IN THE GREAT RUSSIAN REVOLUTION: THE CHILDREN'S COLONIES IN SIBERIA

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On November 4, 1917, the Military Committee of the Soviet of the Workmen's and Soldiers' Deputies issued its first order to the Petrograd garrison. By this order the troops in the capital were asked to transfer their allegiance to the Military Government, i.e., the Bolsheviks.¹ On the night of November 7, the principal government buildings in the Petrograd were occupied by Bolshevik troops; the centers of communication lines were seized and the powers of government passed from Kerensky's hands into those of Lenin.

With the passage of such tremendous political events, the normal routine life of the citizens of Petrograd was utterly disrupted. Economic breakdown followed the political upheaval. For some time before the revolution, the city had been facing a severe famine, which gave rise to a thriving black market. Money became practically worthless and barter alone could secure the necessities of life. People collapsed in the streets; diseases spread readily in weakened bodies. Food cards may still have been able to secure occasionally a piece of moist black bread full of straw and splinters, but the supply was woefully insufficient. Many children were too weak to go to school, and the end of the winter 1917 to 1918 found a number of schools closed.

Parents, fearful of the future and anxious to spare their children the dangers and ugly sights of the aftermath of a revolution, thereupon met and worked out a plan to gather groups of children and to send them, under the guidance of responsible teachers, away from Petrograd until the hoped-for reopening of schools in the fall. This plan of summer colonies was taken in

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¹ Bunyan, James and Fisher, H. H., *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1918; Documents and Materials* (Stanford University, 1924), p. 81.

hand by the Union of Towns,² which guaranteed the necessary money and whatever supplies could be procured.

Since the famine of 1918 was mainly the result of the collapse of the transportation system, it was most intensely felt in the northern parts of Russia which are the farthest removed from the grain belt. Even Moscow was better off than Petrograd, and the Volga region remained almost untouched. It was therefore resolved by the parents that the children should proceed to the fertile Orenburg province, to a little town called Miass, east of the Ural mountains.

The parting from the parents was full of forebodings, especially since, on March 3, 1918, the Bolshevik government had signed the treaty of Brest Litovsk and had thereby severed Russia from her western allies. In May, 1918, the colonies, numbering about one thousand children aged four to seventeen, departed, not without joy, anticipating an extensive holiday and, most important of all, bread—as much as they could eat.³

Upon arrival in Miass the colonies were housed in barracks, as well as with private families. But soon events changed the whole life and prospects of the colonies. On June 8, 1918, the city of Samara on the Volga was taken by detachments of the Czechs who had rebelled against the Bolshevik government. With

² This Union of Towns was established at a meeting of the mayors of various towns on August 8 and 9, 1914. The main speaker declared that "the success of the war would not depend on the strength and organization of the army alone; it would depend directly upon the efficient organization of public forces, on the organization of the community." Imperial sanction was received on August 16, limiting, however, the Union's existence to the duration of the war. Devoted to the relief of the sick, the Union later began to co-operate with the Duma and other liberal forces in order to reorganize the country in the face of war shortages and defeats.

³ The establishment and fate of these colonies are difficult to trace. The only printed record, to the knowledge of the authors, is that embodied in two short Red Cross Bulletins published in Riga on October 20 and December 24, 1920, by the American Red Cross Commission to Western Russia and the Baltic States. Unpublished documentary material on the later history of the colonies exists in the Hoover War Library on War, Revolution and Peace at Stanford, California. References are further to be found in the reports of Arthur Watts and Gregory Welch in the Collection of Friends Service Documents at Haverford College Library. Most of the material embodied in this paper is derived from the unpublished Memoirs of Katherine Swan and a diary of Alfred Swan (written at Samara), both in private possession, and also three reports of Doremus Scudder, Director of Civilian Relief in Western Siberia, dated April 9, and May 7, 1919, and undated, addressed to the American Red Cross Siberian Commission, Advisory Committee. Thanks are due to Mrs. Xenia Jukova Eudin, who furnished the authors with information concerning the final stage of the children's Odyssey.

the capture of Samara, all train service was stopped and connection with central Russia and Petrograd came to an end. A government was formed in Samara under Victor M. Chernov, former president of the Constituent Assembly. A "People's Army" was formed, which had many defects and, because of Socialist agrarian policies, was little trusted by the peasants, but which was supported by Czechs, local Cossacks, and also by ex-officers of the Russian army and members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party.

With the stopping of communication with central Russia, the children's colonies were left stranded. No more money was received to pay the townspeople of Miass. The children, feeling the hopelessness of the plight, were rapidly demoralized; the teachers lost control of them, the townspeople refused to feed them, stealing became a common occurrence, and finally complete lawlessness reigned. Trouble arose between the teachers and townspeople, who finally declared that they would not keep the children beyond the summer.

In July things became so bad that the children had to be moved to Lake Turgayak, a place about ten miles from Miass and situated in the forests of the Urals on the eastern slopes of the mountains. The inhabitants there, in their beautiful country where Old Believers had once found a refuge and had established villages, were still untouched by the horrors to the west of them and enjoyed a certain amount of security and prosperity. But here in this beautiful setting the lawlessness of the children only increased. The summer drew to an end, and the Siberian winter was fast approaching; there was no money, no warm clothes, no homes for one thousand children, and no possibility of an early return to Petrograd.

Under the pressure of such prospects, it was decided to separate the children, to divide them into smaller groups, and to send them to different places, hoping that Providence and the people, in their charity, would not let them perish. The children were sent to the following places:

1. Troizk (Orenburg Province), where they were taken care of by a convent and where their colony was run efficiently and honestly.
2. Uiskaya Stanitsa (Orenburg Province), where they were put up in separate Cossack households for whom they had to work and where they were poorly cared for.

3. Kurgan (Tobolsk Province), where, notwithstanding personal misunderstandings, they were comparatively well taken care of by a teacher and one of the last big land-owners.
4. Petropavlovsk (Akmolinsk Province), where they came under the autocratic and dishonest regime of a teacher and her husband.
5. Tumen (Tobolsk Province), where they were looked after honestly, but inefficiently.

In addition there were two other colonies—Shadrinsk and Irbit (Perm Province)—which were formed of workers' children who had been attending the municipal high schools in Petrograd (Gorodskya Uchilishcha).

By the middle of September, 1918, the children had reached their various destinations and were settled. Their dispersion was to cause considerable difficulties in the later development of affairs.

Rumors of the existence of colonies of about one thousand children from Petrograd, stranded near Miass and facing the Russian winter without adequate provisions, soon traveled through the country and eventually reached a group of the American Y. M. C. A. which had been working in the Volga region and had established headquarters at Samara. In view of the needs of the children, the Y. M. C. A. decided to take a hand in their salvation and despatched a worker, Alfred Swan, to investigate the matter.

Alfred Swan was an Englishman who had been born in Russia. In May, 1918, when the famine in Petrograd was great, he and his wife Katherine had decided to go to regions where food was still plentiful, and, equipped with but a few necessities, since they hoped to return soon, had proceeded via Nizhni-Novgorod down the Volga. While in Samara Alfred Swan met Bayard Christy of Sewickley, Pennsylvania, head of the Y. M. C. A. in Samara,⁴ and joined Christy's Group. Right after beginning their investigations of the children's colonies, the Y. M. C. A. was forced to leave Samara in view of the threat of recovery of the town by the Bolsheviks.⁵ Unable to continue the investigation, the Y. M. C. A. turned the whole matter over to the American Red Cross.

⁴ Three volumes of Mr. Christy's letters describing his year of work with the Y. M. C. A. in Russia in the midst of the revolutionary period are extant. They were made accessible to the authors by the courtesy of Mr. Christy's sister, Miss Ethel Christy.

⁵ Samara was actually retaken on October 7, 1918.

On September 15, 1918, the Swans started on their way to Chelyabinsk in order to establish, first of all, links with Miass, from where the various colonies could be reached. After their arrival they were informed of the past history and deplorable state of the colonies. All were unequipped for the coming winter; food, heating material, and clothing were lacking, and frantic efforts had to be made to secure necessary supplies from the American Red Cross. Eventually, these led to success. The American Red Cross promised to take care of the children and put money at the disposal of the colonies. Its representative, Bishop Tucker from Virginia, went to Omsk and brought with him a long train of much needed supplies. Alfred and Katherine Swan, who had meanwhile induced Charles Colles, Gregory Welch, and Xenia Jukova—the remaining personnel of the Friends' Mission at Samara⁶—to join them, were put in charge of the various colonies.

They found the colonies in a chaotic state. At Petropavlovsk the colony was divided into four groups comprising older boys, older girls, younger boys, and younger girls. While conditions with the young boys, who were under the charge of an Austrian-Polish war prisoner, were fairly satisfactory, the girls found themselves under incompetent and corrupt management, which was but little mitigated through an arrangement according to which every little girl was "adopted" by one of the older girls. The worst conditions prevailed among the older boys. The teacher was without any authority. At the time the Red Cross representatives arrived, they found him locked up in his room, while disorderly looking boys were scattered all over the dirty place, playing, shouting, and cursing. To make matters worse, a typhus epidemic was raging in Petropavlovsk. It took all the facilities of an American Red Cross train to clean up the place, provide it with necessities, care for the sick, and disinfect the town.

At Tumen, the colony was lodged in a big log building, originally a fortress built by the Stroganov family in the time of Ivan the Terrible. When the Red Cross representatives arrived there and entered the spacious yard with its stables and barns, they beheld a depressing sight. In dark corridors, half clad figures were sneaking to and fro; dishevelled boys were playing cards, hardly

⁶ English Quakers, anxious to be of service to war victims, sent a mission of doctors, nurses, and workers to Buzuluk in Samara Province in 1916. When the Bolsheviks came to power, the Quakers' work was so severely interfered with that they dispersed and sent their workers home.

taking notice of the newcomers; fighting went on among the players; others were idly lying on their beds; and all was crowned by a stairway turned into a toilet. Realizing that warm clothes, shoes, and hot meals were more necessary than lectures on behavior and morals, the attention of the Red Cross was promptly turned to the fulfilment of these most urgent needs.

The colony at Troitsk, which was the next to be visited, was fortunately in better shape under the competent and solicitous management of Tatiana Bogdanova and aided by the Mother Superior of a near-by convent. Local people had contributed to the support of the little guests, and, although Dr. Teusler, formerly Superintendent of St. Luke's Hospital in Tokyo and head of all Red Cross activities in Siberia, had put money and supplies at the disposal of the colonies, not much more was needed than the introduction of stricter economy and provisions for future needs.

At Kurgan, however, the colony was in chaos, just as the first two had been. The local landowner and social leader had turned his summer estate over to the children, but intrigues among the teachers had undermined the organization of the colony. While at Kurgan the Red Cross representatives lodged with the British consul. A prominent business man, he had seen workmen set fire to his plant so that only black shattered walls remained. His family having departed for England, his house musty and cold, he spent most of his time in bed, barricaded in his room, pistol in hand, and waited for the Bolsheviks to arrive.

The last of the five colonies was that of Uiskaya Stanitsa, a place almost inaccessible because of its remoteness from the railroad line. The children were scattered all over the village, earning their board and keep as servants in the local Cossacks' homes, while the manageress indulged in dishonest practices and refused to co-operate with those who came to the rescue.

Each colony had to be dealt with separately, and the entire winter of 1918-1919 was spent coping with the various situations. Demoralization in the colonies had increased to such a point that the manageress of Petropavlovsk stirred up the children to a point where they believed that the Red Cross was holding them as hostages for Americans who had been taken by the Bolsheviks. She herself misappropriated the money and provisions allotted to her for the use of the colony.

In January, 1919, the Red Cross decided on the reorganization

of the colonies upon new lines. In Petropavlovsk the dishonest manageress was deposed after confessing to stealing and maligning the Red Cross. Most of the money and stolen goods was regained. Each group at Petropavlovsk was made independent of the others. The older boys were left to take care of themselves without any older person in charge, and soon their rowdiness was changed into a new serious manliness and willingness to shoulder responsibility. At Kurgan, an end was put to the quarrels among the teachers and new appointments were made, so that the whole atmosphere was changed. As to Uiskaya Stanitsa, it was decided to remove the whole colony to a more accessible spot.

This last decision led to the ripening of the idea once more to concentrate all the colonies in one spot. Admiral Kolchak, who had been proclaimed dictator on November 18, 1918, was approached and asked for advice as to where the safest place would be to bring the five colonies and possibly have them joined by the ones at Shadrinsk and Irbit. At the time, Kolchak was successful in his many military operations against the Bolsheviks, and so great was his optimism that he considered Turgayak an appropriate and perfectly safe place. He expected to be in Moscow in the fall so that the children could be sent home. Induced by his assurances, the Red Cross accepted his suggestion and decided that the Uiskaya Stanitsa colony should be brought there first.

In order to carry out the task against the active opposition of the manageress, the help of Czech soldiers had to be asked, and they were only too glad to go on the new adventure. Written orders were given them with a list of every child's name, and a small group of well-armed soldiers set off for Uiskaya Stanitsa. They had great trouble in locating every one of the scattered children and in overcoming the resistance of the manageress. But eventually, the children, packed in huge sleighs filled with straw and surrounded by Czech soldiers with their rifles, arrived at Turgayak.

The evacuation from Petropavlovsk was effected with difficulties of a different kind. The colony, when being removed, was in a much improved shape, thus making the beginning of the transfer to Turgayak easy. It was undertaken right after Easter, 1919. Things were repaired and packed, and on April 25 the trip began in a train of box cars. But trouble arose when after a spell of warm weather a snowstorm set in and the old torn winter clothes

left behind were badly missed. At Chelyabinsk, the train was stopped. The town was by now an important army center, and all passenger service westward had been suspended. On bulletin boards and telegraph poles along the tracks were appeals printed in big letters, urging the soldiers to fight on and to make Kolchak's policies their own. Land was promised to the peasants and the convocation of a Constituent Assembly. The posters made it obvious that Kolchak's position at the front was not so well assured as the Omsk government had painted it when advice regarding the children's colonies had been asked.⁷

The whole group from Petropavlovsk might have been stranded and eventually swept away by the moving armies had it not been for the arrival of a special train carrying General Kappel, leader of the Russian forces.⁸ Taking a great risk, the Red Cross representatives boarded Kappel's train and broke in on a council of war among Kappel and his officers, who were surrounded by all their paraphernalia of maps, charts, etc. Kappel's blank amazement on hearing of a request to take a hundred children to Miass behind his trainload of dynamite turned to a fatalistic acceptance provided he had no responsibility in the dangerous enterprise. On the morning of May 3, the children reached Miass safely.

The expedition of the Troizk colony to Turgayak turned out to be somewhat easier. This colony was moved in June and joined the other two. The colonies at Kurgan and Tumen never reached Turgayak for lack of time before the collapse of the whole Siberian front, nor did the special ones at Irbit and Shadrinsk, although eventually Kurgan, Tumen, and Irbit were united with those of Petropavlovsk, Uskaya Stanitsa, and Troizk at Vladivostok.

By the end of June, the community established at Turgayak was on an organized working basis. It included fourteen cottages and extended over about twenty acres of ground which the local *Zemstvo* had put at the disposal of the Red Cross for the duration of the summer. Horses, carts, and feed were likewise provided, so that the colony could be put on a cooperative basis. A general staff and a social club were formed, and carpenter and shoe shops,

⁷ Kolchak's forces were stopped and his retreat began at the end of April, 1919, before his troops had even reached the Volga.

⁸ General Kappel, a former staff officer of the cavalry, owed his reputation to his efficiency in organizing small forces with which to maneuver over large areas during the civil war. On January 26, 1920, he died of gangrene as a result of freezing both his feet and refusing to leave his men for proper medical aid.

a bakery, and two main kitchens, as well as a dental department, were established. There were dormitories, a school house, a laundry, sewing rooms, a stable, three bath houses, and a hospital which treated, not only the colony, but the village children as well. It had a staff of one doctor, four nurses, and two orderlies. In addition, the colony had seven cooks, three cobblers, four matrons, six attendants, five teachers, two bakers, and other personnel. Discipline was vested in a Board of Houses Presidents elected by the children which made rules and assigned daily tasks. Classes were held regularly, and both English and Russian were taught.

In addition to the above-mentioned twenty acres, there were another twenty-seven, quite a distance away, in a Cossack section called Karasi. With the help of fourteen horses, these were planted with potatoes, oats, beets, onions, carrots, and turnips, enough to feed the colony the following winter, if they were forced to stay. A barter system was introduced to provide for other necessities of life, the Red Cross supplying the local co-operatives with cloth and other things which could be exchanged. The presence of the colony worked out much to the benefit of the community as a whole.

Against a background of such peaceful activities, civil war continued and soon rendered useless all the work and careful preparation. Rumors began to spread late in June that the fortunes of war were turning against the Whites; and when during the month of July it became a certainty that General Kappel was losing all along the front, new worries beset the leaders of the colony. Kolchak's proclaimed dictatorship had brought neither the desired co-ordination of anti-revolutionary forces, nor the expected support of the allies. All realized that Kolchak would be nowhere near Moscow by fall and that if the children were to be returned home it would have to be through the Red Army lines. Another solution, however, was worked out by the Red Cross in Omsk, which likewise came to realize the precarious position of the children and its own representatives in Turgayak.

This solution consisted in an evacuation eastward rather than westward. Quick action was needed, for the front had begun to crumble rapidly, soldiers were fleeing, and little discipline reigned among the retreating as well as advancing soldiery. This involved risks to the lives of many children and to the well-being, particularly, of the considerable number of older girls. About

the middle of July the Red Cross dispatched a plenipotentiary to Turgayak who was charged with the task of attending to the quick dissolution of the colony, the packing of the necessities, and the removal of the children. A special train was chartered, everything was put on it, and thus the colony of Turgayak came to an unforeseen early end. On the way to Omsk it succeeded in picking up the colony which had been established at Kurgan and which, as yet, had not joined the three that were now being carried eastward.

From Omsk, the train proceeded to Vladivostok.⁹ At several places, it was stopped by Bolshevik troops. Tracks were torn, stations burned, and station officers were seen hanging from trees. A band of guerilla troops under the notorious Ataman Semenov, recognizing no authority but their own, held up the train at Chita in search of gold, but finally, after three weeks, Vladivostok was reached on August 20, and the children with their teachers were taken to old barracks at Second River, a suburb of Vladivostok.

The first trainload was soon followed by a second one, which included the children from Irbit and Tumen. The Shadrinsk colony never left Siberia. The other two, however, joined the four first at Second River.

From Second River, all the children were transported to Russian Island for the winter. They were placed in soldiers' barracks which had been unused for years and which had no heat, no water, and no toilets. The food for the children was bad. The stay was, of course, intended to be a short one and preparations were made by the Red Cross to send the children in the spring of 1920 back across Siberia and into European Russia.

This plan, like previous ones, came, however, to naught, being interrupted by the military activities of the Japanese who had taken control of the railroad for some distance out of Vladivostok. Train service was thereby stopped. Consequently, plans were laid to send the children around the world and thus back to their parents, and finally a Japanese boat, the "Yomei Maru," was chartered. This steamer actually took the whole colony that had assembled in Vladivostok all the way to Finland. Seven hundred and eighty-one children arrived there, and were taken to a spacious sanitarium at Halila.

Then lists were printed and distributed in Europe and America.

⁹ Omsk was taken by Red Troops on November 14, 1919.

Wireless press dispatches were flashed to all parts, announcing the arrival of the children and requesting the parents to communicate with the Headquarters of the American Red Cross Commission for Western Russia and the Baltic States, at Riga.

The Red Cross Bulletin published in Riga on December 24, 1920, gives the repatriation figures. Twenty-eight children were repatriated outside of Soviet Russia, one thereof in Finland, fifteen in Estonia, and twelve in Latvia. Six hundred and forty-five children were returned to Russia proper, where they were handed over to Soviet authorities between November 10 and December 20, 1920, about two years and a half after they had left their homes.

A special "Parents Committee" had been formed in Petrograd to receive their children. Some of the parents were anxious to have their children stay where they were, but the Russian government consistently urged the immediate return, and the Red Cross had no authority nor right to guardianship so that a refusal was impossible. Receipts for all children delivered on the International Bridge on the Finnish-Russian border were accepted from the Soviet representatives, and thus ended the Odyssey of most of the thousand children, whose anxious parents had sought to spare them the dangers and vicissitudes of life and of revolution. The fate of the children indicates one of the revolution's manifold and direct effects which, under the weight of the great political and impersonal events, tend to escape the attention of the historian.