

Alexander Vasilyevich Kolchak and his regime in Omsk

by Robert Martens

Very often the histories of Russian Mennonites focus on settlements in European Russia. Not so well-known are the villages of Mennonites in the Siberia region. Today, Siberia conjures up images of exile, prison camps, harsh winters, and the deaths of perhaps millions of slave labourers under Stalin's totalitarian regime. Before 1917, however, the Siberian city of Omsk was a gateway to settlement in the vast steppes that surrounded it – and was itself a destination for Mennonite migrants. In contrast to the tradition of settling in colonies in western Russia, Mennonites in Siberia seemed drawn to urban life as well. These migrants to Siberia were often prosperous: they were retailers, bankers, factory owners, mill owners, professionals – even an oculist by the name of Jakob Isaak (Krahn 1). Omsk, situated on the confluence of the Om and Irtysh Rivers, was a trading and business hub, and prospects there were good for entrepreneurs; it was known as “the Chicago of Siberia.” Of course Mennonite colonies, relatively isolated from the Russian mainstream, proliferated in Siberia as well – in fact there were over one hundred. The city of Omsk, though, remained the financial and economic centre of the region, and a cluster of Mennonites settled in the village of Kulomzino – later called Novo-Omsk – just across the Irtysh River from Omsk and next to the railroad station. The station was a hub for an enormous network of railways, including the great Trans-Siberian (see Huebert/Schroeder 44, 45.)

The peace and prosperity came to a sudden end. After the 1917 February Revolution in which democrat Alexander Kerensky came to power, and especially after the October Bolshevik Revolution of the same year, it seemed that hell descended upon Omsk. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk had taken Russia out of the First World War. Soon afterwards the country disintegrated into civil war, and in Siberia a multitude of armies fought each other for control, including Bolsheviks, Whites, Socialist Revolutionaries, and even foreign interventionist military sent to Russia to re-establish social order and perhaps bring Russia back into the War. At the centre of this bloody whirlwind was a talented and charismatic Russian naval officer, Alexander Kolchak. Today he remains such a controversial figure that the alleged facts of his life vary wildly in the telling.

Early life

Alexander Vasilyevich Kolchak was born in 1874 near St. Petersburg. Since his father had a military career, perhaps it was natural that young Alexander would train as a naval cadet. He was a brilliant man, and learned quickly. In 1899 he joined a polar expedition in the Arctic under the leadership of Edouard von Toll, a Baltic German. Kolchak did research in hydrology and oceanography on the expedition; he would later publish several studies on glaciology, and was highly regarded in the field. In 1902 von Toll was lost in the Arctic. When Kolchak led a team to search for him, only diaries and some equipment were found. The northern expeditions also ended badly for Kolchak: he developed life-long rheumatism from exposure to ice and wind.

Then in 1904, just as Kolchak was preparing to marry Sophia Omirova, the Russo-Japanese War broke out, and it was an unmitigated disaster for the Russian Empire. Kolchak himself was wounded in Port Arthur and imprisoned for four months in Nagasaki. Because of his ill health, he was repatriated before the war ended. He immediately devoted himself to rebuilding the Russian navy, and was involved in the construction of two ice-breakers.

War and revolution

The “war to end all wars” began in 1914. Kolchak was promoted to Rear Admiral at an exceptionally young age, and was sent to establish a defensive minefield in the Baltic Sea. He was always, apparently, personally involved in the dangerous work. He was then made Commander of the Black Sea fleet, but the fleet disintegrated after the February Revolution in 1917, and he travelled back to St. Petersburg, where he declared in the Provisional Government Assembly that the military could only be saved through harsh disciplinary measures. Right wing nationalists took notice, agitating for a leadership role for Kolchak. It appears that Alexander Kerensky, who was then Naval Minister, did not like the competition, and ordered Kolchak to travel to America on a military mission. Kolchak did as ordered, and while in the United States, he was offered a teaching job at the Naval Academy in San Francisco. He turned down the job offer. How different his life would have been had he accepted.

When Kolchak heard about the October Revolution – he was in Japan at the time – he offered to enlist in the British armed forces. Throughout his rather brief life, Kolchak was an admirer of all things British. The United Kingdom, however, had other ideas, and recommended that Kolchak return to Russia to overthrow Lenin and bring order back to the land. According to various sources, Kolchak did so either with “with alacrity” (Pereira 1) or “with a heavy sense of foreboding” (Wiki 4). In 1918 he arrived in Omsk.

The Provisional All-Russian Government

Omsk was a city in chaos, with different factions contending for power and overwhelmed by refugees flooding into it from the surrounding area. The city was now ruled by the Provisional All-Russian Government, comprised of royalists, landowners, factory owners, as well as members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SR) – an uneasy coalition to say the least. The prestigious Kolchak, regarded as honest and able, was immediately appointed as a minister in the government. In 1918 Cossack troops arrested the SR members of government, and Kolchak was voted by the remaining cabinet members as Supreme Leader. “The Council of Ministers,” he wrote in a manifesto, “having all the power in its hands, has invested me, Admiral Alexander Kolchak, with this power. I have accepted this responsibility in the exceptionally difficult circumstances of civil war and complete disorganization of the country, and I now make it known that I shall follow neither the reactionary path nor the deadly path of party strife” (Wiki Kolchak 4).

Moderate words, but Kolchak’s critics charge that he acted despotically, indulging in mass flogging and the razing of villages. They also accuse him of up to 25,000 killings in Yekaterinburg alone; this figure is likely a gross exaggeration. Nevertheless, when an anti-Kolchak uprising was staged on December 22, 1918, it was put down savagely by Cossack and Czech troops. On December 23, they ranged throughout the village of Kulomzino, raping and murdering anyone even faintly suspected of conspiracy. At least five hundred were killed, perhaps many more. Local Mennonites were surely eyewitnesses to the atrocities.

Failure

The situation was dire. SRs, Bolsheviks, Whites, and foreign military – among the latter were Czechs, British, French, Americans, Japanese, Italians, Greeks, and even Canadians – were all involved in the struggle for power. Kolchak harshly suppressed the Bolsheviks, dispersed trade unions, returned factories to their owners, and acknowledged Russia’s foreign debt. For a time his army of possibly 200,000 gained ground as far as Ufa – another region of Mennonite settlement – but eventually they were driven back by the better armed and more populous Reds. In the end, Kolchak’s regime collapsed completely, and Siberians, including Mennonites, were left in the hands of the even more ferocious Bolsheviks.

Why did Kolchak fail so utterly? The reasons are, of course, many and complex: he failed to work well with differing factions; he relied excessively on foreign aid; as a naval officer he had no experience in ground fighting; and his administration was incompetent and often brutal. Kolchak also seemed to have lost his passion for the battle. D. N. Fedotov, who served under Kolchak in Siberia, described him as “aged and different from the active, energetic man he was when I knew him in the navy in the old days. There was something fatalistic about him which I had never noticed before. [He looked] thoroughly tired of groping and struggling in an unfamiliar environment” (qtd McLaughlin 5).

Ultimately, however, the coalition over which he presided may simply have been ungovernable.

Death, and an after note

In November 1919 the Reds entered Omsk without resistance. Admiral Kolchak had fled one month earlier, seeking safe passage to the coast. By this time, even his foreign allies had tired of his autocratic ways, and he was handed over to leftists in Irkutsk after being promised that he would be delivered to the British Embassy. For nine days he was interrogated – reportedly he was courteously treated but that is hard to imagine – and then shot by firing squad along with his former prime minister in January 1920. Their bodies were kicked under the ice of a nearby frozen river. Today a monument to Kolchak stands near the river where he died.

Alexander Kolchak had married Sofia Omirova, and the couple had three children, two of whom died. Sofia waited in Sevastopol for her husband until 1919, then left for Paris, where she died in 1956. Interestingly, perhaps Alexander’s true love was a flamboyant poet and artist, Anna Timiryova, whom he met in 1915. For years, they carried on a passionate affair. When Alexander was arrested in Irkutsk, Anna showed up at the prison and announced, “Arrest me. I cannot live without him” (Wiki Timiryova 1). She would later pay for her relationship with an “enemy of the state”: between 1920 and 1949 she was arrested multiple times. Timiryova was “rehabilitated” in 1960 and died in 1975.

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