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The Blagoveshchensk Drowning—Story of How Phobias Become a Reality¹

The term “Blagoveshchensk Utopia” [Russian word “Utoplenie” means drowning—translator’s note] was coined by an anonymous author in the journal “Vestnik Evropy”² [“Messenger of Europe”—translator’s note] to describe an appalling incident which took place in 1900 in Blagoveshchensk (a town in the Russian Far East, on the Amur River). Over the course of just a few days approximately five thousand Chinese people were killed—to be specific, they were drowned in the River Amur. This incident was not only appalling, but also tragic. In many ways it can be called a sign—a sign which is highly significant to an understanding of the means by which the so-called “yellow peril” was manifested among the populace of the Far East of the Russian Empire. It additionally provides pause for thought about the phenomenon of the *pogrom* itself—how it is caused, how it happens, what forms it may take, who its participants are, and what consequences result.

However, the incident failed to become a cause for introspection among Russian society at the time—and is almost entirely forgotten today. This should not be interpreted as an example of Russian censorship—although this factor exercised some influence up to 1905. The incident was subject to censorship in the Soviet era too, but pre-Revolutionary publications (i.e. those printed prior to 1917) were purposely removed from libraries in any case, so that they were not generally available. It remains most likely that the

¹ This article was prepared with funds provided under the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Competition for Individual Research Projects about Global Safety and Development.

² *The Blagoveshchensk Utopia*, “Vestnik Evropy” (“The Messenger of Europe”), St. Petersburg, 1910, No. 7, pp. 231-241.

incident was put out of the mind of public consciousness due to other—more complex—factors which are the focus of discussion of this article.

Panic

The factual outline of the events is reasonably well-known—we find it consecutively repeated in specialist literature—although most frequently as a discursion from material on other topics being researched by authors.³ In 1898 there had been an uprising in China led by a secret society, “The Boxers”—“assemblies for justice and peace.”

The Boxers embraced xenophobia, and opposed everything and everyone who came from the West to China. Their maxim was to restore the basis of traditional Chinese life—and most particularly, in the early stages of the uprising, they demanded the expulsion and annihilation of all foreigners in China.⁴

Eight countries—including Russia—organised a military expedition intent on defeating the Boxer Rebels and supporting the government troops who opposed them. “The scale of the military forces of the ‘eight interventionist powers’ was an unprecedented warlike confrontation between the Chinese Empire and the Western world.”⁵ The military actions were centred on the province of Manchuria—and thus took place directly on China’s border with the Russian Empire.

The most hazardous development occurred at Blagoveshchensk—the interventionist forces were drawn up on the opposite bank of the River Amur [Chinese usage: Heilongjiang River—its banks form the international border—translator’s note]—the garrison had been directed for military involvement against the Harbin region, but communications had been interrupted by low water in the Shilka River. The population and city fathers of Blagoveshchensk and its surrounding region experienced a very tense feeling—but the possibility of a real threat did not immediately arise. A journalist in Blagoveshchensk wrote that many people had heard about the

³ Cf: V.G. Datsyshen, *The Russo-Chinese War. Manchuria 1900*, Part 1: *Fighting on the land front*, St. Petersburg 1996, pp. 85-96; V.G. Datsyshen, *The History of Russian-Chinese Relations in the Late 19th—the Early 20th Centuries*, Krasnoyarsk 2000, pp. 295-298.

⁴ *A History of China: A Textbook*, Ed. A.V. Meliksetova, Moscow University Press, Moscow 1998, p. 354.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 356.

THE BLAGOVESHCHENSK DROWNING

current events in China, and especially about the round-ups of Europeans—but that real events didn't correlate with the stories.

The scornful view of China and the Chinese was so ingrained, and their cowardice was so well-known to those who bordered them, that frankly no-one expected that a serious war with China could break out in reality.⁶

And then unexpectedly came attacks, and attempts to capture a number of river-going Russian ships on the Amur—followed by shelling of Blagoveshchensk itself from July 2nd. The shelling went on for thirteen days—and although carried out by eight guns, no significant damage was caused. Not a single building was destroyed—five people were killed, and a further fifteen⁷ were wounded. It quickly became apparent from these initial Chinese hostilities and low-level military operations that Chinese firepower was relatively limited. But the Russian authorities were unamused by the attack, and resolved to take immediate measures—the Blagoveshchensk troops returned to their garrison, and significant troop detachments were brought up from Transbaikalia and Khabarovsk. By the end of the month the Russian troops had secured their own banks of the Amur River—then crossed the river and quickly routed the Chinese forces there, and took the provincial capital of Aigun. As soon as the Chinese bank of the Amur River came under the control of the Russian forces, all danger to Blagoveshchensk was quelled.

But what had gone on in the city in those first two weeks, when the situation seemed—and indeed was—most dangerous and uncertain? Unanimous agreement between participant and eye-witness sources confirms that extensive panic broke-out from the time the first shots were fired. Crowds of people rushed aimlessly about the streets. Many fled the city. There were sporadic, and thus fruitless attempts to raise a militia force. Weapons were looted from shops and store-rooms. There were mobs of angry and boozed-up recruits prowling the streets—released from duty over the summer, not reporting to anyone, not given any weapons, and in fact unneeded by anyone. “There would have been nothing easier than to take the city at that moment, even with a small Manchurian contingent” wrote one participant in the conflict.⁸ A further contributing factor to the panic was the presence of a number of Chinese within the city itself.

⁶ *In Memory of the Events on the Amur in 1900. The Siege of Blagoveshchensk and the Taking of Aigun*, Compiled by A. Kirchner, Printed in *Amurskaya Gazeta*, A.V. Kirchner, Blagoveshchensk 1900. p. 5.

⁷ V.G. Datsyshen, *The Russo-Chinese War*, p. 88.

⁸ *In Memory of the Events*, p. 24.

A Fifth Column?

Blagoveshchensk was founded in 1859. It was located in a gold-mining region, and had a strategically valuable location at the confluence of the two major transportation rivers—the Amur and the Zeya. As the administrative centre of the Amur Region it was able to expand “with American speed.”⁹ By 1900 the permanent population numbered some fifty thousand people, with several thousand more seasonal workers employed at the gold workings and on the river shipping traffic on the Amur. Many of these workers were Chinese. In addition to this, almost every well-to-do family would have Chinese servants. Chinese business controlled much of small, medium, and even big business—especially restaurants, taverns, and places of entertainment; they controlled the supply of greengrocery; and they provided the labour which kept public utility services running smoothly. In short the everyday life and economic activity of a town which—by local standards—was prosperous, wealthy and cultivated was unviable without the Chinese population. Theirs was a continuous, all-pervasive and vital presence. On the other hand, the Russian population didn’t accept them as a section of the town’s society—not even an unequal part.

It would be difficult not to include the following quotation from an eyewitness to the events:

For several decades a population of Chinese and Manchurians has lived amongst us, and brought great benefit to our society by their hard work—a fact which was carefully observed by all impartial people. They are hard-working, almost astonishingly modest in their own needs—the Chinese are not only noticeable by their absence of involvement in serious crime, but similarly by refraining from almost every kind of bad behaviour. They are honest and trustworthy—and in many large companies, manufacturing concerns, and also in private homes, the Chinese are relied upon and trusted as both employees and household servants. Many Russian families who had occasion to employ young Chinese men as servants treated them as if they were their own relatives. They often learned the Russian language, and approached this undertaking with such diligence—they would often sit with a Russian book or exercises until past midnight, and this zeal secured them rapid results. But among the less literate of our countrymen the Chinese never enjoyed any great popularity. Common folk viewed them, first and foremost, as representatives of a foreign nationality who stubbornly refused to mix with Russians—and the Chinese, as we know, rarely like to

⁹ *A Guide to the Far East 1910*, BM, BG, p. 295.

THE BLAGOVESHCHENSK DROWNING

stray from their own culture, or their form of dress. Secondly, the Russian working classes always saw the Chinese as unwanted competitors.¹⁰

But once the shelling began, Russians began to look at the Chinese differently. They noticed how very many Chinese there were, and how far they'd become dependent upon them. But most significantly they were reminded how far away Russia was, and how very close and enormous China was—easily capable of gulping down and digesting every last morsel of their remote and defenceless island of Empire. Thus the syndrome of the “yellow peril”—thereto principally a concern for publishers, analysts, government officials, and what the ordinary man in the street thought, if he thought anything at all about things beyond his own concern—suddenly acquired an immediate and horrific reality.

The whole horror of the situation could suddenly be seen presented among those who, only the day before, had chattered with good-natured contempt about the “coolies,” “chinks” and “slit-eyes.” Locals began to look suspiciously into the eyes of their domestic servants—who only a few days before they'd regarded, if not perhaps as members of their own family, then at least indispensable members of their domestic household. People began to see the Chinese they past in the street, to use a modern term, as a “fifth column.” The city seethed with rumours of secret Chinese military factions, and their defiant nature, and how they were making plans for a massacre. Some claimed to have seen arsenals—although searches uncovered only knives. But the searches also revealed pamphlets produced by the Boxers—which added fuel to the flames.¹¹

Incidents quickly followed. Their initiators were often military recruits who had been billeted in the town far away from home, and who were already in unhappy mood. “The burly fists of unwanted troops don't miss a chance to drown their woes—usually on the backs of the ‘Vankas’ they see passing silently by—meaning, the Chinese.”¹² While beating them, they shouted “It's all because of you, filth, that we've lost our jobs, been torn from our families, and dragged here to this mess!”¹³ All the while, local newspapers were documenting the numbers of such cases. By the end of the first day of shelling, the first deaths were recorded. “According to the highest authorities,

¹⁰ Sonin, *The Bombing of Blagoveshchensk by the Chinese (An Eyewitness Account)*, Um, BG (A reprint of the number 4, *Dawn*), p. 6.

¹¹ *The Military Events of the Past Year on the Amur*, Compiled by N.Z. Golubtsov, Published in *Amurskaya Gazeta*, A.V. Kirchner, Blagoveshchensk 1901, p. 15.

¹² *In Memory of the Events*, p. 5.

¹³ Sonin, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

even the Police were advising people to murder the Chinese—they feared that they might otherwise set the town ablaze by night.”¹⁴

The Governor

It was clear that the town was on the verge of a full-scale pogrom. Whether that verge was crossed now depended upon the position of the local authorities, and primarily upon the city governor—Lieutenant-General Konstantin Gribsky. An analysis of his actions illustrates poor preparedness, absence of any logic, and a low level of competence in general.

On the first day of hostilities, 3rd July, he had already received communications from the Minister of War, Alexander Kuropatkin, couched in the most severe tone:

I trust that by calling up the required forces and resources you will prove yourself worthy of the trust invested in you by the authorities, and will carry out an energetic and total defeat of the Chinese. Thus you may escape the severely prejudicial assessment towards you arising from your utter ignorance of what was going on the opposite bank of the Amur across from Blagoveshchensk.¹⁵

Gribsky’s incompetence becomes apparent in his actions and relations with the Chinese living in Blagoveshchensk. As early as June, when the situation was already of great concern, the Military Governor met with members of the City Council. Among several issues, the question of the possible need to defend the city was discussed. The Governor said he did not find it necessary or appropriate to take special measures in this matter—as no state of war between Russia and China had been announced. He further revealed that representatives of the local Chinese community in the town had come to him, asking whether it might not be better if they were to quit Russian territory entirely? According to Gribsky’s account, he conveyed to them that they could safely remain, because “the Government of the great Russian Empire would not permit anyone to injure civilians.” He swiftly issued a proclamation, wherein he threatened severe punishments for anyone insulting the Chinese civilian population.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁵ Quoted from: V.G. Datsyshen, *The Russo-Chinese War*, p. 88.

¹⁶ Sonin, *op. cit.*, p. 4. Most likely, this episode is described in the “Diary of Maj. Gen. X”, excerpts of which are listed in *The Messenger of Europe*: “Several days before the shelling, merchants and wealthy Chinese from Yulhozan and others came to the Director of the Chinese Bank for advice—what to do—to leave Blagoveshchensk, or stay. The Director sent them to

THE BLAGOVESHCHENSK DROWNING

Believing in the Governor's word, several thousand Chinese remains in the city of Blagoveshchensk—but they quickly had occasion to regret doing so. When the murder and slaughter began, the city authorities took no steps whatsoever to intervene. No kind of official pronouncement was made, nor was any official action taken. Moreover, it was the representatives of the local government, and especially the police, who directly prompted the violence.

On the 3rd of July—in other words, after several days of inaction at the most critical point—at the urging of the Chief of Police, the Military Governor issued orders to expel all Chinese from the cities of the Amur Region. Raids were mounted using the ranks of the Police, and volunteers who numbered both private citizens and Cossacks—as a result of which several thousand people were interned. These raids were accompanied by extensive looting, lynchings and murders. No attempt was made to prevent this taking place.

There were incidents in which local people from Blagoveshchensk attempted to shelter their Chinese friends, especially their domestic servants—but their neighbours gave them away. Harboursing those accused of treason was punishable by death—so in fact very few were saved. Some rich merchants saved their own lives by managing to buy off the police. But even a colossal bribe didn't exempt them from two weeks of beatings and abuse whilst in police custody.

Massacre

The events which follow were more completely reconstructed by the anonymous author of the article in the *Messenger of Europe* journal, based on the materials in the official archives of the court. The incidents quoted are correlated by Sonin,¹⁷ who was an eyewitness to the events. There are no significant discrepancies between these two accounts. We can therefore assume them to be reliable when presenting the event.

On 4th July, the first group of Chinese who had been rounded-up on the previous day was dispatched to the settlement of Upper Blagoveshchensky, 10 kilometres away along the Amur River. They numbered from 3500 to 4000 men (other estimates place the figure as high as 5–6 thousand) and were under a guard of recruits armed with axes in lieu of guns. The pace was quick, the road was bad, and the weather was very hot—many, especially the elderly, couldn't keep up. The officer in charge of the cordon gave an order

ask the Governor, that is, General Gribsky, who was kind and assured them that they are under the protection of Russian law, and need not be afraid of anything—let alone needing to leave the city." (*Blagoveshchensk "Utopia," "The Messenger of Europe,"* 1910, No. 7, p. 237)

¹⁷ *Blagoveshchensk "Utopia,"* pp. 231-241; Sonin, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-20.

that stragglers were to be “hacked to death with axes.” This order was carried out, and several dozen detainees were killed during the forced march. An investigation which followed later established that this had been accompanied with theft—both those who survived and who died were robbed along the way.

Neither during the round-ups nor the forced march was any attempt made to resist. Nor did any of the detainees attempt to escape, although the purely symbolic conditions of the cordon would hardly have made doing so a difficult matter.

When they reached the settlement they were joined by armed Cossack citizens, under the command of their Hetman. They chose a place to make the river crossing. The Amur was more than 200 metres wide at this point, with a depth of up to four metres and a powerful current. The Chinese were led to the water’s edge, and commanded to swim. After the first to enter the water drowned almost immediately, the others refused to follow. Coercion then followed—at first with Cossack horse-whips, and then with firing at close range. The shooting was done by anyone who had a gun—Cossacks, peasants, the elderly, and children. After half an hour of shooting, by which time a considerable pile of corpses lined the river-bank, the officer in charge commanded the use of cold steel. The Cossacks fixed bayonets, while the recruits used axes. The Chinese rushed into the water to save themselves from being bayoneted—but the fierce current of the water drowned nearly all of them, and a maximum of one hundred succeeded in swimming to the opposite bank.

Sonin—most likely from the accounts of those who were involved—gives alarming details on what took place. He quotes one case of a young Chinese mother with breast-feeding infant—at first she ran to the bank, then tried to swim without the child, then came back and tried to swim with the infant too. As a result, both were drowned.

None of the shooting party protested. A few recruits lacked the willpower to hack people down with axes—at which the Cossacks declared they should be beheaded as traitors. One recruit saved a young boy whose mother had been killed—but this was the only instance of pity which the investigation revealed. During the following days, continuing to 8th July, a similar fate fell to further parties of Chinese detainees, totalling several hundred people in all. And since officers in charge quickly prepared reports of what had taken place for their superiors, it is clear that the events didn’t go unnoticed by the authorities.

The Spoils

The event couldn't be kept secret from the whole population—if only because in such a small and secluded community secrets are not possible. For several days afterwards large numbers of corpses floated past Blagoveshchensk along the river. Three weeks after the incident an officer named Alexander Vereshchagin—sailing along the Amur by steam-ship—noted that hundreds of corpses had floated down the river and piled up on the banks.¹⁸

During the same period lynchings took place in many villages of the area. When village elders questioned whether they should kill the Chinese or not, they were instructed to do so by the authorities. A typical replies are contained in telegrams sent by Chief of the Amur Military Command, General Volkovinsky:

Regarding killing the Chinese ... you must be mad to keep asking permission each time, ... you must be mad and simple-minded to ask what to do with the Chinese ... when you are ordered to kill them, then you should get on and kill them without any further discussion ... All of my orders are to be carried out without any exception or dissension, stop bothering me with your nonsense.

When summarising the results of the Judicial Inquiry that followed, the author of the Official Report concluded: “the collective testimony of eye-witnesses to the incident leads to the unavoidable conclusion that this was no river-crossing—but instead the purposed massacre and drowning of the Chinese.”

It was only on 7th July, when it was all over, that Gribsky sent a telegram with the following message:

I wish to explain to the elders of all village councils that we are waging battle upon the armed Chinese, who wish ill towards us. No ill-will must be shown to peaceful or friendly Chinese, most especially those who are unarmed. These should be sent across to their own side in boats, or in steam-ships.

These self-same instructions were issued to the public by the Governor in a special memorandum dated July 9th, printed-up as pamphlets and distributed throughout the town.¹⁹

It has been brought to my attention that certain residents of the town of Blagoveshchensk, in addition to the peasant and Cossack population in

¹⁸ A.V. Vereshchagin, *In Manchuria. 1900–1901 years. Memoirs and Stories*, “The Messenger of Europe,” 1902, No. 1. pp. 116–118.

¹⁹ Quoted from: N.I. Dubinina, *Amur Governor General N.I. Grodekov: A Historical and Biographical Sketch*, Publishing House Priamurskie Vedomosti, Khabarovsk 2001, p. 239.

the region under my control, have committed certain violent acts against Manchurian and Chinese civilian people living in the area. Attacks upon an unarmed and defenceless enemy are quite out of the character of Russian people.

“Disgraceful acts of aggression” were caused by the “outpouring of anger against the appalling treachery of the Chinese—who began hostilities against us without any motivation from our side.” To eliminate any “further attacks on the person or property of Chinese people living peacefully amongst us” the Governor ordered that abuses would be punished to the fullest extent permitted in time of war. In order “to prevent the spread of infectious diseases from the large numbers of corpses of dead Chinese people floating down the River Amur,” such bodies were ordered to be collected and buried.

The pogrom was accompanied by widespread and extensive looting. Some robbed the corpses of the dead—others exploited the chaos of the situation to steal the goods of Chinese storehouses or shops. Goods were frequently stolen by the very police who claimed to be protecting them. Quite a few got rich in all this—many more found themselves relieved of the need to pay-off debts to Chinese lenders. Sonin mentions “a significant role in the hideous massacre of the Chinese, and the justifications for it, lies in self-interest, greed, and the chance to evade payment of debts.” He goes on to list a number of cases of theft of which the entire town was aware—in which the most active pilfering was undertaken by the police and civil servants, after which he concludes:

It was clear to all inhabitants of the town that the Governor was turning a blind eye to the theft of Chinese property. Many explained his behaviour by claiming that a considerable part of the proceeds came into his hands.²⁰

Furthermore the incoming Governor-General, D.I. Subotich, collected documents on the case, and stated:

The principle motive which drove the local population towards the attack on the Chinese was greed—evading Chinese creditors, and stealing the property of those who had been killed.²¹

The Position of the Authorities

The position of the Blagoveshchensk authorities was simple and clear. General Konstantin Gribsky, with whose permission (and possible connivance)

²⁰ Sonin, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-14.

²¹ Dubinina, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

the pogrom took place, “washed his hands” of the matter by issuing a memorandum on July 9th. Murders were presented in this document as the work of alleged criminals—criminals who committed these acts randomly. However, Gribsky couldn’t manage to cover over the fact of mass murder, even by resorting to wartime conditions in mitigation. An Official Investigation was appointed—but Gribsky decided not to inform his superior, Amur Governor-General Nikolai Grodekov, of it.

However, as publicity grew, the investigation was moved to a higher level under the authorities in Khabarovsk and St. Petersburg, and became a judicial investigation. As far as can be discerned from the documentation, the attitude of those in authority to the incident was indifferent. Gribsky, for example, was neither commended nor condemned—on both human and professional levels. Reaction of the Minister of War, Alexander Kuropatkin, who had previously held a very low opinion of the abilities of the Military Governor of Amur, was harsh: “During the period of your governance—and thanks, perhaps, to measures not being taken in due time—a great number of innocent people were killed without due cause.”²²

The attitude of the immediate superiors can be clearly discerned in a typical passage from the already-cited diary of “General X”:

At the Mess-Table of General Grodekov—where all of his staff habitually met—it was a breach of etiquette to talk about the Amur Region, as though it was an indelicate matter ... but occasionally a word might be raised, and then another, by which it quickly became clear that they knew all about it in Khabarovsk, but did not approve of it. They alluded to G[ribsky] as if to some recently-deceased person about whom no ill should be spoken. If that unfortunate topic should happen to arise, then all would peer into their plates in confusion, and silence reigned.²³

Despite the extremely tense situation and danger around the border area, there were no other places on Russia’s territory where such pogroms took place. We must assume that the pre-pogrom situation did not turn into massacres due to the attitudes and action of local commanders, which further aggravated Gribsky’s guilt. Even so, neither condemnation nor disapproval resulted in any kind of action. The honour of the uniform was at stake, so the matter had to be hushed up. Nina Dubinina characterised Grodekov’s official position—

Deeply traumatised by this tragic incident, Nikolai Grodekov rose to the defence of the Military Governor, Konstantin Gribsky. To quote the

²² Ibid.

²³ *Blagoveschensk “Utopia,”* p. 241.

words of War Minister Kuropatkin, General Grodekov stood solidly behind Gribsky's woe.²⁴

The preliminary judicial investigation which had been started was minimized. "By the agreement of three Ministers—Jägermeister Sipyagin, State Secretary Muravyov and Adjutant-General Kuropatkin—in February 1902 it was decided to seek to bring the investigation to a close without disciplining those responsible." In consequence of the administrative inquiry Gribsky was relieved of his command, but simultaneously noting "his former excellent service, and valour in military action in the Far East in 1900" and he was retained in military service without demotion. He was presented with claims for mismanagement—that he had not given a written order for the deportations; he limited himself to oral orders; he failed to check the feasibility of the river-crossing; and he failed to make timely report to his superiors about the incident.²⁵ After a due period of time had passed, he was appointed Governor of one of the Western provinces of the Russian Empire.²⁶

Three further instigators of the incident suffered rather more harshly. The Chief of Police was removed from his post "for failure to exercise power, and mismanagement." The Deputy Chief of Police pleaded guilty to "not only failing to keep the guards and private individuals from acts of violence against the Chinese as they were swimming across the river, but calling on them to open fire at them and to hack them with axes." In result he was "dismissed from the service without leave to appeal, and placed under arrest in a guardhouse for two months." Colonel Volkovinsky—who, unlike Gribsky, left numerous written orders connected with the murders—was "dismissed from the service without leave to appeal, with no right to apply again to the service, and ordered to be arrested in a guardhouse for 3 months." All others involved were entirely exonerated from blame—not only judicial, but also administrative.²⁷

The logic behind the Tribunal needs no special comment—"unpleasant matters" had to be covered-over to save the honour of the uniform, to protect the reputation of the State, and to look after "their own" guilty men in the situation, while rapping their knuckles symbolically.

For exactly the same reasons restrictions were imposed—including censorship—on the distribution of information about the case. Sonin wrote about this in a publication which came out after the October Manifesto of

²⁴ Dubinina, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

²⁵ *Blagoveschensk "Utopia,"* p. 240.

²⁶ Dubinina, *op. cit.*, p. 341.

²⁷ *Blagoveschensk "Utopia,"* pp. 240-241.

1905 i.e. after the lifting, or at least extensive softening of censorship. A further issue was that unlike Soviet-era censorship, there was no total and comprehensive censorship at this time.²⁸ The example, the January issue of the *Messenger of Europe* journal for 1902 published the travel journal of a military officer involved in the war, Alexander Vereshchagin. These notes describe in some detail the events at Blagoveshchensk, and a description of how he saw the dead bodies of the Chinese floating in the River Amur.²⁹ The newspaper *Amursky Krai* covered the story in a restrained manner, with little comment but frank detail.³⁰

Public Reaction

The facts of the incident had become known to the Russian public from the outset. Or at least, information had been available. After 1905 detailed results of the public inquest were published. The population of Blagoveshchensk also knew all about it—at once, and in detail. There was no problem, then, with either ignorance or lack of information, nor in clarifying the details. The public was instead confronted with the question of how it should deal with what had happened.

There wasn't a single way of dealing with it—and given the circumstances, there couldn't be a united feeling on the matter. But if we try to identify some common core of feeling, then what is most noticeable is the absence of any kind of reaction at all—the event was actively ignored. This may seem, strange, given the national conscience of the time, the intense discussion of the national question, the extreme polarisation of society, and strident ideological and political arguments over the Jewish pogroms, the “Dreyfus Case,” the “Bayliss Case” and so forth. But here, thousands of Chinese had been viciously murdered, merely for being Chinese—and the result was a complete lack of any public reaction.

There are only two possible ways of explaining this. Either the public genuinely perceived the incident as lacking importance and significance—or did indeed regard the incident as significant but was unable or unwilling to discuss it. It is worth adding at this point that the author recognises the difficulty and uncertainty of categories such as “society,” and “public opinion”—most especially in Russia. In any case, here we are discussing an

²⁸ Sonin, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

²⁹ A.V. Vereshchagin, *op. cit.*, pp. 112–118.

³⁰ *In Memory of the Events...; The Military Events..., Compendium of the Amursky Krai Newspaper. Articles about the war on the Amur, appearing in the newspaper from 1 July to 1 August 1900, Blagoveshchensk 1900, p. 152.*

attempt to reconstruct the logic behind what the educated section of the public of the time was feeling, from the literature it left behind for us to use in such attempts. How the simpler people—peasants, Cossacks, gold-prospectors—felt about the Chinese, and their mass-murder—is a question for a separate discussion.

Best-preserved are the fragments of the reactions of the inhabitants of Blagoveshchensk itself. According to the account left by Vereshchagin, just weeks after the incident happened it had become the main talking-point for all citizens of the town. Every shade of opinion might be heard. Typical accounts are reflected in the series of essays which were published by this military officer on his furlough. In the dark of evening, the steamer on which he was traveling along the Amur River approached some blackened objects in the water. “A Chinaman,” said the aged ship’s pilot in a half-voice—with the kind of tone you might talk about a pothole or an obstacle. A contemptuous smile broke out over the old man’s wrinkled face and ragged brown beard. The smile seemed to say “what’s the point of paying any attention to that kind of flotsam?” The typical reaction of the passengers, when the bodies of the drowned appeared in the full width of the Amur River, was to rush out of their cabins to look at this unprecedented sight.” And after seeing it, they all went down to supper.

Vereshchagin recalls a conversation with an elderly servant from Blagoveshchensk—who witnessed the police driving his neighbour out of his own house with whips. The neighbour was “a stout, elderly Chinese, a wealthy millionaire” who had been trading in the city for thirty years. The interviewee felt sorry for the old Chinese man, with whom he’d been on neighbourly terms for many years—he said the man had been a friendly and good man, who had often written-off the debts of his Russian clients.

Of course, it was an atrocity, to annihilate a peaceful population of several thousand people—but there again, you must also understand our point of view. Half the population were Chinese. And then suddenly shelling begins from the opposite bank of the river. And who was doing the shelling? It was their comrades, their fellow believers. So it was understandable that hostility arose towards them. The whole city was certain that there was a pact between those Chinese and ours, to rise up and slaughter the Russians. There was no military to stop them, nor were there any weapons. So when the shelling began, the Russians—of course—ran to the authorities for weapons, and at the same time began begging them to deport the Chinese to the other side. And when they were shoved to the riverside, with no means of transport across—well, it’s entirely understandable that the catastrophe happened, which had to happen inevitably.³¹

³¹A.V. Vereschagin, *op. cit.*, pp. 112-118.

THE BLAGOVESHCHENSK DROWNING

The views of the liberal section of the town's community were reflected in the columns of the "Amursky Krai" [*Amur Region*] newspaper. Back on June 23rd the editorial columns had published a piece titled "Is Europe Truly Threatened by Yellow-Skinned Barbarians? Is she ready for an attack by a vicious and implacable enemy which intends the destruction of all civilisation?" The newspaper answered its own question thus:

These are curious concerns. Chinese people today resemble barbarians as little as modern Europeans resemble their medieval forebears. By the unanimous and complete opinion of all those who are acquainted with the inhabitants of the Middle Kingdom [i.e. China—translator's note], they are a peaceable people, industrious, and most tolerant. They have only one wish—to be left alone in peace, and to be given the chance to live as best they may. In conclusion we should note that the social conditions of our age have so radically altered, that it now seems absurd to give serious consideration to talk of invasions, or the annihilation of civilisation.

Subsequently the newspaper would report the events that followed as a massacre of unarmed civilians—whose only crime was "not to have left earlier, because they trusted us" (from the newspaper's editorial of July 14th). A few days earlier—in the issue of July 12th—the publication attempted to explain what had happened.

Whether viewed from the Chinese perspective or from our own, the clash which occurred took on the character of a people's war—a war embittered by the gaping gulf created by racial, historical and economic grievances. It was a war that erupted with a furious passion, with atrocities of a kind not previously witnessed. Every stratum of society—not only simple folk, but intelligent people too—saw in every representative of the yellow race an enemy which constituted a threat if allowed to remain at large. Panicked into fear by the threat of Manchurian invasion, and hatred towards neighbours who had always previously been hard-working and peaceful, resulted in the torching of many Manchurian settlements, the destruction of property they'd acquired over long years, and the taking of many lives". People expected threat from every Chinese person, the author continues—and thus aimed their blow at all of them. Not even the educated section of society could overcome this, and "failed to rise above the hatred of the yellow race in general—hatred that is so harmful to our society and country.³²

Yet after some time, the tone of the evaluations takes a noticeable turn. The summary of the materials and documents on the 1900 incident, and comments upon them, which was undertaken by newspaper owner Alexander Kirchner comes to the following conclusion: Yes, certainly, there was appalling

³² *Compendium of the Amursky Krai Newspaper*, pp. 54-63.

wickedness committed, including mass slayings and looting. But it was all provoked by the threat of war and military actions which posed a deadly danger to the city and its inhabitants. Moreover “it’s a great mistake to look upon those Chinese who decided to remain in the city as mere civilians.” If their intentions were truly peaceable then they would have enlisted in the ranks of the town’s militia—but, although they knew in advance of the forthcoming bombardment, they failed to give any warning of it, they behaved provocatively, they began preparations for mass slaughter, and made plans for full-scale looting in the event that the town was taken. “We, the civilian population of the town, had to take responsibility for defending ourselves against these so-called ‘peaceful’ Chinese.” Overall

this unexpected war—which began and ended so peculiarly—gives pause for thought as to what skulks deep in the souls of our yellow-faced neighbours. What a serious enemy they might prove, if provided with European-standard weaponry, and given competent commanders and generals.

Finally “it would be a grave mistake to rely upon the peaceful assurances of the Chinese—in future, we must be on our guard.”³³

In a similar bulletin which Kirchner compiled in the following year, the events were described in summary and curt fashion: “here the facts must suffice that the Chinese swam across the River Amur.”³⁴ One can only speculate as the reasons behind this astonishing reinterpretation...

Nor was *Amurskaya Gazeta* an exception in this matter. The topic of Blagoveshchensk events almost entirely disappears from published mainstream literature of the time on Chinese migration.³⁵ They write about almost everything else—but not about that. In extreme cases there might be obscure reference, passing remarks, or euphemisms—about something which was fully known to the entire community.³⁶

Attempts to penetrate the conspiracy of silence begin with the publication of Sonin’s article, which appears to have been published in 1906, to judge by its content. Thereafter an anonymous article appeared in the *Messenger of Europe* for 1910. These publications differed greatly in their style and

³³ *In Memory of the Events...*, pp. 1V, 8, 29, 35, 52, 124-126.

³⁴ *The Military Events...*, p. 16.

³⁵ For further details see: V. Dyatlov, *Chinese Migration and a Discussion of the “Yellow Peril” in Pre-Revolutionary Russia*, “Bulletin of Eurasia,” Moscow, 2000, No. 1, pp. 63-89.

³⁶ See for example: V.V. Grave, *The Chinese, Koreans and Japanese on the Amur*, “Work carried out on orders from the Supreme Amur Expedition,” Vol. XI, St. Petersburg 1912, p. 44; F. Duhovetsky, *The Yellow Question*, “Russian Journal,” St. Petersburg 1900, No. 12, p. 743; N.V. Slyunin, *The Present Situation in Our Far East Territories*, St. Petersburg, 1908, p. 149; P. Timofeev, *Freeport in The Far East & Russian Cosmopolitanism*, Moscow 1908, pp. 36; L.K., *Studies in the History of Siberian life*, “Siberian Questions,” St. Petersburg 1911, No. 1, p. 40.

approach (a highly emotional eyewitness account, and the dry details of the internal investigation) and circumvented the censorship rules—but neither succeeded in reaching any wide readership.

The Rationale for the Silence

Why did this silence happen? It's possible to construct a variety of hypotheses and assumptions. It may indeed be that these events failed to find an interested readership among the Russian public—even among that section which habitually responds to high-profile manifestations of national and social injustice or violence. It all took place in the farthest periphery of the Empire during wartime—and wartime events are different, and assessed by a different standard. “The savagery of war” could be treated quite differently to—let us say—a pogrom against the Jews in peacetime.

For others the most fundamental issue was the identity of the victims of the violence. The Chinese were viewed as “extraterrestrials,” or—to use the widespread metaphor of the time, as “ants”³⁷—they were representatives of some distant and alien culture and civilisation. We might be forced to conclude that the violence against them comes from the sphere of interpersonal relationships. A significant role was played by the presentation of a “yellow peril” which threatened the very basis of European civilisation. Viewed in this perspective, the Blagoveshchensk “Utopia” could be viewed as a brutal but necessary measure of self-defence.

A more simplistic explanation is also possible—that the events simply failed to find the voice of a suitably talented and influential journalist, and thus—as we might say today—“didn't play to best effect.” The same thing has occurred subsequently. For example, the forced deportation of 60,000 ethnic Asians from Uganda in 1972 was reported all around the world—but the far more ambitious and vicious deportation of one million Ghanaians from Nigeria went practically unnoticed.³⁸

We can't exclude the possibility, however, that the silence was motivated by horror of what had occurred. The two World Wars, the Armenian genocide by the Ottoman Empire, and the Holocaust were still yet to come. In the forefront were impressions that technological and economic progress have radically changed the human nature for the better. And then suddenly, to quote Sonin, “right on the doorstep of C20th middle-class Europe came an

³⁷ See, for example, a talented monograph of that era: Verezhnikov, *A Chinese Crowd*, “Contemporary,” St. Petersburg 1911, No. 4, pp. 124-134.

³⁸ V. Dyatlov, *Enterprising Minorities: Fraudsters, Strangers, or Just Sent by God? Symbiosis, Conflict, & Integration in the Arab East and Sub-Saharan Africa*, Moscow 1996, p. 178.

atrocities no less barbarous than the hordes of Tamerlane or Genghis Khan.”³⁹ Perhaps coming to terms with the events was so traumatic that the event dropped out of collective memory. Society tried so hard to forget, that it succeeded.

None of these hypotheses are mutually exclusive, and each is capable of coexisting with others. It’s hardly possible to suggest which might be the more accurate. But for an analysis of the causes and outcomes of the Blagoveshchensk massacre, for insight into the logic in the minds of its perpetrators, and the eyewitnesses and information sources—the sources are both scanty and fragmentary.

The Mechanisms of the Pogrom

There can be no doubt that the town’s population found itself suddenly in a pent-up state in which certain essential fundamentals of life appeared lost. Practically all witnesses mention the numbing panic which enveloped the town. The mighty Empire, defended by the tiny outcrop the people of Blagoveshchensk thought themselves to be, seemed to be very far away. This fear was magnified by the fact the enemy was (or at least, seemed that he was) not only outside (China was just across the River Amur from Blagoveshchensk), but was actually among the townspeople—the enemy was omnipresent, and all-pervasive. Add now to that fear an intense sense of humiliation—the Chinese who had habitually been used, ignored, or despised, suddenly appeared to be a terrifying force. Very possibly underlying fears were unleashed which had been formed earlier.

These feelings of fear and humiliation unfettered many inhibitions and societal taboos. In particular these included the attitude towards the Chinese, of which Sonin (and others) had written: “In the eyes of our simpler folk, a Chinese is not even human—he is a ‘creature’ or a ‘beast’.”⁴⁰ In fact earlier many observers had noted unprompted acts of violence against the Chinese, a daily dose of humiliation—and this was not even perceived as unacceptable.

One keen-sighted observer wrote:

“Coolie,” “chinky,” “snub-nose”—this is how he is known everywhere with mocking condescension of a high ranker towards a low ranker, an adult towards a teenager. To push him in the forehead, pull his ponytail, trip him over, or give him a good cuffing—it was all allowed, with complete impunity,

³⁹ Sonin, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

THE BLAGOVESHCHENSK DROWNING

and done for laughs. Robbing, or mugging a “chinky,” even in broad daylight, was considered a trifling matter, entirely blameless—like taking a lamb to slaughter. Any kind of explanation for it seemed to be entirely meaningless. And if the “good townsfolk” should happen to find the corpse of some “coolie” along the roadside, they just strung him up by the heels and lowered him into the nearest hole—and that would be all. No names, no paperwork, no consequences. There were others to take care of ...⁴¹

Fear, humiliation, and a habit of regarding the Chinese as “things”—it all produced a safe haven for bullying the weak and defenceless, and afforded space to the worst and most vicious instincts. Even the educated part of Blagoveshchensk’s population, who regarded themselves as the guardians of European civilisations gates, beyond which stood the barbarians, accepted the pogrom—either by direct approval or by silent non-condemnation.

We shouldn’t omit things which are simply practical and day-to-day. The widespread looting and theft from the Chinese gave many the chance to spend several pleasant evenings in the tavern, while others grew suddenly rich. The Chinese shops and warehouses contained goods worth vast sums of money—and they were all looted. No-one had to pay their debts—and the sums were rarely small. The Chinese competed with local Russians for work on the Amur River, and in the goldfields. Their deportation caused a huge shortage in the labour market—leaving the way clear for the lowest classes of society in Blagoveshchensk to claim it.

Incidentally, the “fog of war” provided an effective guise for the resolution of the situation of the “Zazeisky Manchurians,” which had been a longstanding headache for the Russian authorities. The matter related to residents of the district of Zazeisk, which officially belonged to Russia, but, under the Treaty of Aigun, remained within the Chinese jurisdiction. According to the Census of 1897, they numbered 7608 people. Their stateless status and uncontrollable nature must certainly have angered the local administration, while their developed lands and property attracted the not-so-selfless attention of the Russian population. In 1900 the area was liquidated by troops of the local militia, who burned the Chinese villages—some of the population fled, while the rest were massacred.⁴²

⁴¹ A.N. Matveev, *Chinese in the Carian Fields*, “Russian Wealth,” St. Petersburg 1911, No. 12, p. 30.

⁴² For further details see: Datsyshen, *Formation of The Chinese Community in The Russian Empire (Second half of the 19th century)*, “Diaspora,” Moscow 2001, No. 2-3, pp. 37-38.

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The Blagoveshchensk Massacre can be called a model for a pogrom. On one hand we find an angry crowd, driven by the darkest instincts of mob rule—while on the other, we find the authorities inciting events. Experience in the other towns of the region has shown that without the explicit or tacit encouragement of the authorities, even the most tense situations do not result in riots. And in fact in Blagoveshchensk it only took the Military Governor to speak out firmly and clearly against the rioting, and it immediately stopped.

Finally, let us mention life in Blagoveshchensk after the hostilities. Without the Chinese population it proved extremely difficult to maintain the normal operation of public services. Food prices rose sharply, and the economy went into crisis. Unsurprisingly, the Chinese soon returned. By 1907 their number had returned to pre-hostility levels, and they returned to their previous economic activities. A correspondent in the newspaper *Siberia*, writing under the pseudonym “the Frowning Optimist,” wrote: “As the past was gradually falling into oblivion, the Chinese, driven by hunger and unemployment, flowed across the Amur River with new energy and re-established themselves. What, indeed, could dissuade hungry people from looking for an income? And on the Amur, there is plenty for all.”⁴³

⁴³ *Siberia*, Irkutsk, 10 January 1907.