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“The Blagoveshchensk Utopia”: Historical Memory and Historical Responsibility

A reaction to my article published quite long ago that I found totally unexpected has served as my reason for writing this paper. The article in question was devoted to a half-forgotten tragic event in Russian history of the late Empire period.¹ It concerned a mass murder of Chinese Blagoveshchensk residents in 1900, the time when this borderline city was facing a grassroots wave of the anti-foreigner Boxer Rebellion (or Yihetuan Movement) spreading across China. I was interested in two issues connected with this unusual and terrifying incident: the mechanism of the pogrom and the reaction of the society. The event itself was discussed, although insufficiently, in a number of works written by researchers. Therefore, there seemed to be no attempts to raise the subject again. My objective was not so much to broaden our knowledge of the event (although such a possibility could not be excluded) as to reconstruct the version known to the society, to which the latter reacted one way or another. What shocked me the most was a considerably indifferent reaction of the contemporaries—I have constructed several contradicting hypotheses to find an explanation for such a state of affairs.

The article has not passed unnoticed and created a stir in researcher circles. It was referred to and sometimes criticized. The article written by T.S. Sorokina proved especially important.² Based on a thorough analysis of archive materials she was able to specify and correct certain details

¹V.I. Dyatlov, *Blagoveshchenskaya “utopiya”: iz istorii materializatsii fobii*, in *Evraziya. Lyudi i mify*, Natalis, Moscow 2003, pp. 123-141.

²T.N. Sorokina, *Eshche raz o “blagoveshchenskoi ‘utopii” 1900 g.* In: *Migratsennye protsessy na Dalnem Vostokev (s drevneishikh vremen do nachala XX v.)*. Materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii (Blagoveshchensk, 17–18 maya 2004 g.); Blagoveshchensk 2004, pp. 295-303.

concerning, for instance, the number of victims. Generally, the reaction to my paper as a scientific publication seemed entirely unsurprising.

Quite frankly, returning to the theme of an old article does not happen very often in scientific circles. One needs to have serious reasons for doing so, otherwise it is justly perceived as pretentious. And I had absolutely no plans to take up the subject. Nonetheless, a few years following the publication of the article I accidentally read a discussion it initiated in an Internet forum. I must admit I was shocked. The article was purely academic in terms of style, published in a high-ranking, but still scientific journal, and later in a collection of papers—both limited-edition. Its electronic version was initially published on the website of the *Vestnik Evrazii* journal and then in an online journal entitled *Demoskop—Weekly* popular in academic circles. And again, the latter are scientific sources read by a narrow circle of specialists.

My Internet search showed that the article reached far beyond the academic community, i.e. its subject and the issues it rendered “took off” or—in other words—attracted a lot of attention. Someone added it to Wikipedia, which provoked over a dozen discussions. As any author would, I was hoping that my article had become so popular because of its literary or scientific value, but it seemed rather unlikely. It was its content that triggered the discussions. The event itself.

The issues of historical responsibility and historical memory appear spontaneously, they are discussed and—most importantly—they *affect* people. Did it actually happen? Who is to blame? Could our ancestors really have done something like that? And if so—why? And how should we react to it as their descendants? Should we react at all? Should such terrifying and shameful events be remembered and recollected? Should skeletons be brought out of the closet? Especially that the matter has aroused great interest in China. Wouldn't recalling such incidents adversely affect the interests of our country and our generation? Could we—the descendants—be held responsible for everything our ancestors once did? Is so—in what way? Can the whole nation be blamed? Can nations be considered evil? Should particular nations take the eternal historical blame for things done to others? Should collective responsibility exist at all? And to the extent of bearing legal consequences? Can we understand or explain the nature of such past events? Or their direct and indirect participants? What does being taught a lesson actually mean? Is repentance an obligation to others or a matter of individual reflection?

It is astounding how parallel it seems to a several-year-long discussion in Poland on the issue brought up in a book entitled *Neighbors: The Destruction*

of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland written by Jan Tomasz Gross,³ i.e. to the experience of the situation that mass and violent murders of Jews in a small Polish town of Jedwabne in the summer of 1941 were actually committed by the Poles themselves. By the neighbors of the dead, the people the latter used to know well. And the persecutors acted of their own free will, although with the approval from the German occupation authorities. Nevertheless, one difference is worth emphasizing. Contrarily to Poland where the book by J. T. Gross and the situation described in it have been discussed by the whole country and where it is difficult to avoid taking a stance on the subject, in the Russian case we have witnessed total spontaneity. Someone accidentally came across an article on the Internet, which concerned an old and forgotten, completely unfamiliar incident. The reader was shocked, made the article accessible via Internet, or added a link, and commented on it starting a discussion. There was no socially significant reason for spreading this information—after all, publishing a scientific article about long-forgotten events that happened “at the back of beyond” in a low-circulation academic journal cannot serve the purpose. There were no questions formulated in advance or issues to be considered. And this is what makes such discussions particularly valuable, also from a researcher’s point of view.

Another thing is that the subject for discussion, i.e. the set of problems and the perspective presented in the old article, is the author’s version of the events. Some participants of the discussion attempted to search for and succeeded in finding other materials they later used to criticize the author’s version. My article became part and parcel of the discussion, and as such a part of research material for this paper. Therefore (and only therefore), it is published here along with this one, in its original version, without any further editing, unrevised and unsupplemented. Moreover, it is complemented with the article by Tatyana Sorokina on the response of the Russian-Empire local and central authorities to the “Blagoveshchensk incident.” The simultaneous publication of these three articles will enable readers to analyze the reaction of the Russian society from different angles.

Available sources of information

People’s reaction to events depends on the amount of information at their disposal. Naturally, there are also other factors, but this one is absolutely

³ One of the Russian translations: Y.T. Gross, *Sosedi. Istoriya unichtozheniya evreiskogo mestechka*, translated from Polish by V.S. Kulagina-Yartseva, Foreword by A. Michnik, “Tekst,” Druzhba narodov, Moscow 2002.

crucial. Without information there is no event, and hence, no reaction to it. To provoke wide response information needs to be spread effectively. The way it is organized, structured and addressed seems equally important. It cannot be neutral. This is the basis for presenting an issue and creating an attitude towards it. Words are selected, that could be later employed to discuss and evaluate the problem. Therefore, it is so essential to examine what exactly the contemporaries of the events in question and our contemporaries knew or know about the “Blagoveshchensk case,” who provided them with the information and which versions of the incident they could deal with.

The information obtained by the *local* contemporaries, directly or indirectly participating in the events, was thorough and complete from the very beginning. It is quite obvious in the case of a small and self-contained community. Another thing is that in the conditions of widespread panic a tremendous role was played by rumors—and that, naturally, affected the picture of the events created by available information. Apart from unofficial sources of information there were also local newspapers as well as various official statements and announcements made by the authorities. In hot pursuit, only a few months following the events, a booklet on the subject was issued by A. V. Kirkhner, the editor-in-chief and publisher of *Amurskaya gazeta*.⁴ The most essential thing is, however, that there were corpses floating down the river and flowing through the city for a few days after the incident. They were hardly possible not remain unnoticed. And not reacted to.

From the very start the news about the incident reached other countries. For instance, already in September the Moscow correspondent of the London-based *Standard* newspaper wrote about the events highly precisely describing their course and character. Generally, they resounded worldwide in English-language press. Copies of New Zealand newspapers that have been made available on the Internet can serve as a perfect example here.⁵ The tone of these articles was critical of Russia. Nonetheless, it is necessary to take a general context into account—for the months previous to the incident in question European press abounded in reports on the atrocities against Europeans conducted by Boxer rebels in China. And a little later—in the ones on penal sanctions imposed by the eight-powers expedition, especially on the cruelty of German forces. The Blagoveshchensk events were presented against the general background of violence and atrocities. Perhaps this was the reason why the travel notes made later by an American

⁴ A.V. Kirkhner, *Na pamyat' o sobytiyakh na Amure v 1900 godu. Osada Blagoveshchenska i vzyatie Aiguna*, Blagoveshchensk 1900.

⁵ *Papers Past*, *Hawke's Bay Herald*. 22 September 1900, p. 3. Chinese crisis. (<http://paperspast.natlib.govd.nz/cgi-bin/paperpast?a=d&d=HBH19000922.1.3&e>)

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R. Penrose who visited Blagoveshchensk in 1901 expressed sympathy for the city residents.⁶

Reactions abroad, especially in Europe, had traditionally constituted an important factor as regards forming the public opinion in Russia. Nevertheless, the educated part of the society had its own independent sources of information. The anonymous article published in the influential *Vestnik Evropy* included extensive factual material based on preliminary results of the administrative investigation.⁷ The latest news about the events could also be found in the travel notes by A. V. Vereshchagin who came to Blagoveshchensk only a few days following the tragic events.⁸ There were also a few published accounts of eyewitnesses.⁹ A significant role in forming the overall view of the incident was played by articles written by its eyewitness, journalist and political exile L. Deich. (published under his own name and under a pseudonym).¹⁰ Additionally, an entry in *The Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary* concerning the subject proves that it was quite significant and popular in pre-revolutionary Russia.

The Revolution and Civil War that unleashed tremendous mass repression as well as both an unprecedented and familiar extent of cruelty pushed “the Blagoveshchensk story” into the background of public attention. It was generally forgotten, perhaps with the exception of the local residents and their descendants who have preserved vague oral tradition of the events in their memory. The first edition of *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia* (1927) included an entry devoted to the Blagoveshchensk incident, the second and third ones, however, had it removed. The disappearance of the events in question from historical memory was caused by great social cataclysms of the time, destruction of tradition and liquidating the whole generations of its carriers, and by a purposeful policy of the authorities that considered the subject ideologically and politically harmful and dangerous.

Pre-revolutionary texts, however, remained available in libraries, since they often failed to be kept in special depositories. Archives stored masses of documents and historians were allowed to have access to a considerably large

⁶ R.A.F. Penrose, *The Last Stand of the Old Siberia*, F. Fell Co. Publishers, Philadelphia 1922.

⁷ V., *Blagoveshchenskaya „Utopiya,”* “Vestnik Evropy,” No. 7, July 1910.

⁸ A.V. Vereshchagin, *Po Manchzhurii. 1900–1901 gg. Vospominaniya i rasskazy,* “Vestnik Evropy,” No. 1, 1902.

⁹ A.K., *Iz vospominanii ob osade Blagoveshchenska kitaitsami,* “Sibirskie voprosy,” No. 36, 1910; K. Nikitina, *Osada Blagoveshchenska kitaitsami v 1900 godu (Iz vospominanii),* “Istoricheskii Vestnik,” No. 10, 1910, pp. 207-224.

¹⁰ Sonin, *Bombardirovka Blagoveshchenska kitaitsami (ras skaz ochevidtza),* reprint from “Zari,” No. 4, B. m., B. g.

part of them. What is more, foreign specialists continued writing about the incident.¹¹ The Russian policy regarding the Far East, including the events of 1900, was subject to ongoing studies. Because of censorship researchers of the time could not take up the Blagoveshchensk issue, but they were aware of it and took it into consideration. The moment their publications stopped being censored, i.e. with the collapse of the Soviet system, they reintroduced the subject into an open academic debate. It was not, however, treated as an independent incident, but analyzed in the context of Russia's participation in suppressing the Boxer Uprising,¹² the history of Russian-Chinese relations and the problem of Chinese migration to Russia.¹³ And in her book devoted to problems of Russian-Chinese borderline relations A. Ivastina quoted recollections of a Japanese eyewitness of the events.¹⁴ The works regarding solely the Blagoveshchensk issue, however, are limited to the articles written by Tatyana Sorokina¹⁵ and me.

The subject has been reintroduced to Blagoveshchensk official historical memory. Any kind of fact concealment is now out of the question. Exhaustive, precise and unbiased information has been made available on the official website of the Amur Province.¹⁶ There have also been several articles in local press as well as some radio and television programs. What is more, a collection of scientific articles, reprints of pre-revolutionary texts and rare photographs devoted to the role Blagoveshchensk played in the events of 1900 was prepared and beautifully published.¹⁷ And the Wikipedia entry concerning the Yihetuan Movement includes a passage on the Blagoveshchensk events.

¹¹ See e.g.: A. Malozemoff, *Russian Far East Policy, 1881–1904. With Special Emphasis on the Causes of the Russo-Japanese War*, Univ. of California Press, Berkeley 1958, pp. 139-141.

¹² V.G. Datsyshen, *Russko-kitaiskaya voina. Man'chzhuria 1900 g. Chast' 1. Boevye deistviya na sukhoputnom fronte*; Saint Petersburg 1996, pp. 85-96; Id., *Istoriya russko-kitaiskikh otnoshenii v kontse XIX–nachale XX vv.*, Krasnoyarsk 2000, pp. 295-298.

¹³ O.A. Timofeev, *Rossiisko-kitaiskie otnosheniya v Priamur'e (seredina XIX–nachalno XX vv.)*, Blagoveshchensk 2003, (http://igpi.ru/center/lib/hist_tradit/east/china/timofeev1.html); A.G. Larin, *Kitaittsy v Rossii vchera i segodnya: istoricheskii ocherk*, Moscow 2003, pp. 41-42; A.G. Larin, *Kitaiskie migranty v Rossii. Istoriya i sovremennost'*, Moscow 2009, pp. 43-44; A.V. Usova, *Istoriya kitaitsev, man'chzhurov i daurov zazeiskogo kraja vovtoroi polovine XIX veka*. Avtoreferat diss. kand. ist. nauk, Moscow 2005; A.P. Zabiyaiko, R.A. Kobyzov, L.A. Ponkratova, *Russkie i kitaittsy: etnomigratsionnye procesy na Dal'nem Vostoke*; Amurskii gos. un-tet, Blagoveshchensk 2009; pp. 43-52.

¹⁴ A. Ivasita, *4000 kilometrov problem. Rossiisko-kitaiskaia granitsa*, AST; Vostok-Zapad, Moscow 2006, pp. 222-224.

¹⁵ T.N. Sorokina, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ See e.g.: the official website of the Amur Province authorities (www.amurobl.ru).

¹⁷ *Voennye sobytiya v Priamur'e. 1900–1902*; In the *Priamur'e. Iz veka v vek* series, OAO "Amurskaya jarmarka," Blagoveshchensk-na-Amure 2008.

Literary writings have not fallen behind as well. Thanks to a hint given by a participant of an Internet discussion I have come across an interesting novel representing the genre of historical fantasy telling a story about the Boxer Rebellion, including the Blagoveshchensk case.¹⁸

To sum up, both the contemporaries of the events and our contemporaries had and still have fully sufficient and diverse base of information allowing them to find out about the incident and form their own opinions.

Versions of the Contemporaries: Attempts at Understanding and Explaining the Situation and Their Own Actions

There are numerous signs indicating that the educated society of pre-revolutionary Russia was well aware of the Blagoveshchensk tragedy. For instance, L. N. Tolstoy read the issue of *Vestnik Evropy* including the article on “the Blagoveshchensk utopia.” A.F. Koni giving an unfavorable characterization of Nikolas II of Russia blamed the latter for complete indifference “to the action taken by General Gribskii who drowned five thousand Chinese civilians in 1900 ...”¹⁹ *Novosti dnya* issued in Moscow announcing that Gribskii had been temporarily appointed War Governor in Łomża recalled that “this is the very brave general who as Governor of the Amur Province during the Boxer Movement of 1900 drowned several thousand innocent Chinese civilians from Blagoveshchensk in the Amur River.”²⁰

From these randomly selected comments it is already quite evident that the knowledge of the events was not neutral. Reviewing the body of pre-revolutionary texts enables us to single out several different ways of explaining and evaluating of the incident. The essence of the most extreme attitude was unequivocally described by an American traveler R. Penrose.²¹ Liquidating the Chinese was a necessary and justified means of self-defense from the barbaric threat employed by a civilized nation. The Blagoveshchensk Chinese in conspiracy with their countrymen from the other side of the Amur were planning to slaughter all the inhabitants of this rather small city, so isolated in the vast Russian territory. “Facing such a situation a civilized man should respond with a lethal blow to defend his home and family, and that was exactly what the Russians did.” Having found out about the conspiracy

¹⁸ R. Kortes, *Tolmach*; modernlib.ru.doc.zip

¹⁹ A.F. Koni, *Izbrannoe*, Sov. Rossiya, Moscow 1989, pp. 104-105.

²⁰ *Novosti dnya*, October 9 1905.

²¹ R.A.F. Penrose, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-80.

they attacked the Chinese living in the city, killed them in great numbers and drove the ones who survived into the river where most of them drowned. Hardly anyone else in Russia wrote so bluntly and peremptorily, though, undoubtedly, many thought the same way.

The prevailing versions of events were based on the explanations and announcements given by the local and central authorities (a detailed analysis of the official versions can be found in the article by T.S. Sorokina also published in this issue). With some exceptions their essence is the following: Blagoveshchensk, almost defenseless from a military perspective, became a target of an unprovoked attack from China. The Chinese inhabiting the city potentially represented an additional threat. It was sometimes alleged that they could be plotting against the Russians. Rumor had it that some leaflets written in Chinese were found (their content was not included in official investigation materials, although one can by no means exclude the possibility that they existed). This was the reason why the Governor ordered to take measures he found necessary and legitimate in the conditions of war, i.e. to deport all the subjects of the enemy making them cross the Amur. Through the fault of the low ranking officers the command was carried out without sufficient technical support. Therefore, “in fact the river crossing of the Chinese took place by swimming,” and almost all of them drowned in the process.²² The death of several thousand unarmed civilians was a tragic result of exceeding the necessity of self-defense and carrying out orders too officiously, both explainable and justifiable in an extraordinary life-threatening situation.

These theses were explicitly formulated in an apologetic biography of Nicolas II of Russia written and published by S.S. Ol'denburg already in exile (Belgrade, 1939).

At that time the Russian-Chinese frontier zone was thrown into a panic. The Russian borderline city of Blagoveshchensk came under prolonged fire from the Chinese Amur bank. The shooters were undoubtedly “regular” Chinese soldiers. Not a long time before the Russian forces had been withdrawn down the Amur. Blagoveshchensk remained almost defenseless and the panic spreading among the residents and the local authorities resulted in acts of violence against the local Chinese: in fear of an uprising that might have been organized by the Chinese behind the front line and having heard of the atrocities happening in China, the Blagoveshchensk authorities gathered all the “yellow people” at the Amur bank and ordered them to swim across the river to the Manchurian side. Only a minority managed to succeed and several hundred drowned in the wide river. This

²² *Voennye sobyitiya proshlogo leta na Amure*, coll. by N.Z. Golubtsov, Tipografiya Amursjkoï gazety A.V. Kirkhnera, Blagoveshchensk 1901, p. 16.

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tragic incident, understandable in the fearful atmosphere of the time (the local intelligentsia—noted with a certain degree of indignation the liberal press published farther from the borderline—approved of this panic-driven repression), showed how difficult preserving ‘Russian-Chinese friendship’ proved in practice.”²³

Supporters of another version, however, consider these events a crime resulting from incompetence of the authorities and widespread panic among the residents. A standard-setting publication, i.e. *The Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary*, offers the following perspective:

... the Russian authorities in Blagoveshchensk ordered all the Chinese to abandon the Russian territory without any legal grounds for it (for according to the international law regulations binding at that time such action could not be taken even in a state of war, and Russia did not wage war with Ch.) or a sufficient reason since the Blagoveshchensk Chinese were solely civilians. The exact date was specified and the Chinese were gathered at the Amur bank. They were not provided with boats and nonetheless, they were forced to leave instantly, threatened with immediate death. They started swimming across the river and the Russians kept them under fire. Only few of them managed to reach the Chinese bank and the estimated number of victims differs considerably depending on the source of information—from three to seven thousand. Acting this way Europeans sowed seeds of hatred in China, which they now have to deal with.”²⁴

Having said these words (not in quotes) the *Obozrevatel’* columnist V. Vodovozov summed up:

This barbaric, purely medieval use of violence ... in terms of its cruelty and senselessness undoubtedly exceeded everything the Chinese had ever done against Europeans. And, naturally, it could not go without a scar on the soul of the Chinese people.²⁵

Assessments of “the nature and extent of the crime” could vary considerably: from criminal incompetence of the authorities (especially the Governor who lost control over the situation and gave a completely impracticable order) to a purposeful pogrom of civilians, i.e. a war crime.

The last viewpoint is indirectly reflected in the first edition of *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia*:

²³ S.S. Ol'denburg, *Tsarstvovanie Imperatora Nikolaya II. Samoderzhavnoe pravlenie. 1894–1904*, Chapter 1 (<http://emalkrest.narod.ru/txt/oldnbrg.htm> Access date: May 9, 2012).

²⁴ *Entsyklopedicheskii slovar’*, F.A. Brokhaus Press, ed. I.E. Andreevskii, Add. Vol. 1A, Gaagskaya konferentsiya — Kochubei, p. 911.

²⁵ V. Vodovozov, *Voina s Kitaem i voina s Iliodorom*, “Sovremennik,” No. 3, 1911, p. 355.

In 1900, in the greatest turmoil of the Boxer Uprising, when the Chinese authorities in Manchuria, carrying out an order from Beijing, declared war on Russia, the Russian administration of Blagoveshchensk decided in retaliation to expel all the Chinese residents of the city and forced up to 5 thousand Chinese civilians, including men, women and children, to drown in the Amur.²⁶

From this perspective—even if the extermination (“drowning”) of the Blagoveshchensk Chinese could have been explained (although not justified) with unprovoked fire opened on the city by the Chinese, the actual threat of destruction of both the city and its residents, as well as monstrous panic—slaughtering and deporting “the Zeya area Manchurians”²⁷ that followed had no justification whatsoever. The same refers to acts of plundering the possessions of the deported. It is important to emphasize that all the accusations were addressed only to the state authorities and its representatives.

Thus, educated contemporaries of the events in question not only had considerably vast amount of information on the subject at their disposal, but also a few versions of its understanding and evaluation. What is more, most assessments of the events were clearly negative. Even these who sought to defend the initiators of and participants of the incident regarding them too as victims of insuperable force-majeure circumstances were not ready to justify or distance themselves from the violent death of several thousand civilians. Nevertheless, this mass disapproving attitude did not turn into a direct protest, if only expressed by the part of the community that had already demonstrated a distinctly negative reaction to pogroms and persecution that had taken place in the country for national or religious reasons. And by that time the authorities should have taken such a reaction into consideration.

A Century Later: Returning to the Subject

The issue of the Blagoveshchensk tragedy has become a subject of contemporary public discussions initiated by professional historians. It seems natural considering the fact that—at best—the events have been preserved in oral tradition as vague stories.

²⁶ *Bol'shaya sovetskaya entsiklopediya*, Sovetskaya Entsiklopediya, Moscow 1927, V. 6, p. 452.

²⁷ Chinese subjects, inhabitants of the “Zeya area” included in the Russian Empire. According to the Aigun Treaty (1858) they preserved their status of subjects and until 1900 were in fact extraterritorial. (For further details see: A.P. Zabiako, R.A. Kobyzov, L.A. Ponkratova, *op. cit.*, pp. 43-52).

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But more or less in 1947 my grandfather Andron Afanas'evich told me at the Amur River bank that at the time of his youth—he used to serve in the army here—all the Chinese from Blagoveshchensk and the neighboring area were gathered and forced into the water. They were trying to swim across the river and somehow reach the other bank. It seemed so far back in the past—in the tsarist time—and our country, i.e. the USRR, had nothing to do with the shady affairs of the last Emperor.²⁸

Scientific works offered not only information but also evaluation, angles to view things at and words to express opinions. And the information itself could not be purely neutral. Its appearance itself already meant presenting a particular attitude. With their generally evaluating tone the opinions seemed to match the pre-revolutionary situation: they ranged from regretting the use of violent methods to take necessary measures, legitimate during the war, to considering (directly or indirectly) the policy of the local authorities as criminal. It is hardly surprising taking into account that contemporary authors strongly based on the powerful pre-revolutionary historical tradition. The professional discourse, however, seems interesting only insofar as it is connected with popular discussions and mostly because of the set of subjects, issues and stories it has formulated that later triggered discussions on the Internet and in the press.

Internet discussions were the main source for writing this passage of the article. They are peculiar and require a special attitude—as well as some author's comments.²⁹ Their participants remain anonymous and their opinions are expressed in their individual blogs and websites, as a rule also anonymous. Forums that reveal information about their participants and overall concept are very rare. Thus, only texts alone can be analyzed. It is clear that the level and content of a given discussion, style of particular entries and character of opinions can differ from one forum to another (and in fact they do so). The content of texts betrays a lot about their authors. They vary depending on their viewpoints (from liberals and democrats to extreme nationalists), the literary value of texts (from completely illiterate to examples of highbrow culture), and the skills to analyze the discussed problem. In practice, however, there hardly are situations when forum participants discuss things only in “their usual crowd.” Discussions are generally open and their administrators only occasionally delete selected replicas to follow a code of ethics and remain politically correct. Forum participants put up with “strangers,” since they often take part in dialogues. Therefore, links to other addresses are generally non-informative.

²⁸ V. Kochergin, *Stalin i Mao slushayut nas*, “Duel,” No. 19 (418), May 17, 2005.

²⁹ Discussion on the subject: *Forum: Nauchnoe znanie v usloviyakh Interneta*, “Antropologicheskii forum,” No. 14, 2011, pp. 7-130.

Based on the above an extremely controversial and critic-prone decision has been made in this case, i.e. the one to analyze replicas as such, without references to blogs or websites. In other words, there will not be full quotations with the names of authors given. We can assume that the whole phenomenon can be described as one general discussion with a significant role played by the content and style of anonymous entries. Authors' grammar and spelling will be preserved and any separate references will concern solely individual articles and statements. Thus the result should remind us of a collage, the jigsaw picture created using specially grouped pieces, i.e. replicas selected by the author. Naturally, it is because there is no particular need and possibility here for employing interpretative attitudes of quantitative sociology.

It seems logical to start the analysis of Internet discussions from the reasons for their participants' interest in the subject. One can very roughly specify four motives: humanism, ideology, professional interests, and curiosity. And it is quite obvious that one author can be driven by more than one motive (and sometimes even by all of them) at the same time.

Generally, in the analyzed cases an emotional shock served as a trigger for discussing the particular subject. It is an initial and common reaction. For instance:

“Guess one shouldn't think about sad things on Christmas Eve [i.e. *Sochel'nik*] ... I saw ... a link to an article Victor Dyatlov wrote for *Vestnik Evrazii* ... A big thank you ... It's a total nightmare” “Some story to sleep on.” “... Can't read it and still keep calm. It's almost like 'wrapping someone's gut around the roadside bushes' (as they do in Vsevolod Ivanov's short stories on the Civil War).” “Read this text. One can learn a thing or two. And it reads VERY MUCH like literature ... Wanna read it, take some downer.” “It is an episode from Russian history that is a must to know about ... Let's say it bluntly—it's an eerie story.” “At some point I was under a great influence of this story: the whole thing was absolutely shocking.” “A terrible tragedy, now completely forgotten. After all, how little we actually know about our own and quite recent history!”

And following the above—a range of reactions. Negating the very existence of the events. Striving for understanding the logic and motives of their participants, witnesses and contemporaries. Readiness to take responsibility and thoughts of repentance.

“*No way it could happen*”—this is the first and almost instinctive reaction.

A little anti-Blagoveshchensk story ... some “beasts” beat up the innocent Chinese ... just don't buy the provocation!” “A hundred million thousand hacked hacked, hacked hacked ... and just like that, for no reason ... on the orders of the authorities, and the authorities still avoid to show

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off this bloody slaughter ...” “up to 10 thousand Chinese (according to some data from some sources) and 80 recruits carrying hatchets, through lack of other weapons, and the crowd that came running, of less-cultured layers of our population ... and the children distinguished themselves with particular cruelty ... (I wonder if pregnant women and Cossacks took part in that slaughter together with old men—veterans and war invalids of the Crimean War?). With the river flowing, so fast how come the corpses were floating on the Amur and through Blagoveshchensk for so many days ... They surely forgot to mention the way they were floating back and forth on the bloody river. And compared to that Hitchcock’s nothing but wimpish.

Shitty material, definitely written to order. Actions of the arrested betray no logic whatsoever. Fear caused by an adrenaline rush ... in 90 per cent cases turns into rage. Some people have this threshold too high. But only an idiot would assume that all of them were like that. They were talking the same bullshit about gas chambers: 2000-2500 people guarded by 20 others went to their death without the slightest resistance. One command would be enough, but I think nobody actually gave it. Apparently they all wanted to die.” “how come a hundred men could guard 4-6 thousand? And at the same time hack them with hatchets? ... besides, it is totally obvious that they could swim along the river bank, get out of the water and flee in the mountains.

I don’t give a damn about the bullshit they wrote there. I know my people well. Russians wouldn’t have anything to do with mass pogroms and killings for no weighty reason. And if so, they wouldn’t be any pogroms but self-defense. In our history we have never committed genocide! Senseless extermination of people does not match our mentality. Especially in such pastoral and patriarchal wilderness as Blagoveshchensk. If it really happened, someone must have carefully omitted or concealed a large and the most crucial part of this nasty story. And the Russians had their really highly significant reasons to do what they did! Knowing the Chinese and their tactics to slowly capture territories by their gradual settlement and imposing a new order, and their inability to assimilate one can assume that a great number of them must have come to Blagoveshchensk. And that their behavior resembled the one of today’s Caucasians ... They have never respected us—neither back then nor now ... If Russians really were prone to such pointless reactionary cruelty, we would have betrayed this tendency much earlier and regularly.

... the Wiki entry’s crap ... nothing concrete about these events in the sources they give.” “... both then and now somebody tried really hard to turn everything against Russia and the Russians. Liberasty [i.e. the combination of liberalism and pederasty]—it’s a lie multiplied by ignorance and Russophobia.” “I wonder why nobody ever signs such provocative remarks? Who needs this hysterics? One time bad revolutionary bandits killed poor intervening Japs and Russian traitors, another—poor Chinese

civilians were done in with just a few shots fired and a few hits. All instead of waiting for the fully armed Chinese to come and slaughter Russian civilians. Who exactly needs Russian bandits? After all, it's all about that, right? Who's hiring you, hacks? And nobody seems to mention preventive actions." "An utter nightmare ...—tolerastic [tolerant + pederastic] propaganda?—Or rather a Russophobic provocation." "And Dyatlov's clearly a liberast [liberal + pederast] and a flunky of the London *gorkom* [i.e. *gorodskoi komitet* or power center].

To sum up briefly, it is too terrifying to be true. The Russians are by nature incapable of doing something of the sort because of their eternal unchanging mentality. It goes beyond all reason—after all, a few dozen people cannot technically liquidate so many others without facing any resistance or attempts to run away. And corpses cannot float down the river and pass Blagoveshchensk for a few days, given the rapid current. The article was commissioned by an American fund and written for its money, and its content is a bunch of intrigues, a conspiracy and provocation of liberasts and Russophobes. Aggression, mockery, invectives hurled at the author of the article are—apparently—not so much a manifestation of style and peculiar culture of relationships in contemporary Russian Internet as a result of readers' experiencing a shock and viewing the issue from the angle of collective responsibility, guilt and innocence of the nation.

The latter aspect is especially visible in discussions taking place on Internet forums that consider themselves national (The Website of the Buryat Nation—*Sait buryatskogo naroda*; The Khakass Nation Forum—*Forum khakasskogo naroda*; the proUA.com forum; The Ostrov Forum; and the Belarusian portal TUT.BY).

Oh yeah, the 'God-bearing nation.'" "Is it a manifestation of the Russian character or what?" "In fact the Russian soil has always based on such an attitude towards foreigners and that's not gonna change (for the short time it still has left, that is). The Northern Nations treated like dirt or worse, Bashkirs with their noses cut off, the Tungus and other Khanty-Mansi that were considered a kind of 'underpeople', the Chechens they wouldn't spit on if they were on fire ... the Jews—not allowed to live in Russian provinces and exterminated at any opportunity.

There was a discussion at The Khakass Nation Forum regarding a program broadcast by the Ekho Moskvyy on Ghengis Khan and the cruelties accompanying the rise of his empire. The participants perceived it as a manifestation of racism and chauvinism, and as blaming all the nomadic nations for backwardness and pathological cruelty. "A typically Western approach: nomads are devils straight from hell, robbing peaceful and civilized farmers." And to argue the opposite they give examples of atrocities

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committed by “civilized European nations,” including “the Blagoveshchensk utopia.” In response to analogical debates on Ukrainian webpages the following counter arguments are referred to: numerous pogroms of Jews, Khmelnytsky’s time and Taras Bulba. (“It reminds me of Taras Bulba. What was the beginning of the Sitch Rebellion again? Oh, that’s right. All the Jews were drowned in the Dnieper River. And apparently not by compassionate and politically correct Ukrainians, but by Russian *krovavaya gebhya* [liberal term used for the KGB], right?”).

A nation as such is understood as an eternal and unchanging body with a certain character and an immanent inclination (or a lack of it) to pathological cruelty. (“Bestial cruelty on the Zen level?”) Thus, the conclusion is that some nations’ guilt is eternal and unattonable.

Perceiving the issue in terms of “us versus them” and viewing the Russians and the Chinese as inherently uniform and unchanging bodies leads to the conclusion that the Blagoveshchensk Chinese have only themselves to blame for the incident. They either actually were “the fifth column” or could well have been one. They posed a danger as part of the whole Chinese mass, regardless their individual attitude and intentions. Perhaps the ones who died were innocent, but they took the responsibility for the actions of all the Chinese during the Boxer Uprising. For the real or potential fatal threat to Russia and the Russians posed by the Chinese at the time, and the situation in fact still has not changed. This is why all actions against them have been justified as preventive. The blame also lies with the authorities that allowed for the Chinese presence in Russia. If there were not for the Chinese, there would not be any problems.

Many people just can’t afford to admit this shameful fact. That we exterminated unarmed and defenseless people.—Nobody denies that. It’s just that there’s no need to cry bitter tears in vain. The Chinese were just asking for it and they got what they deserved. They shouldn’t have started their shady business. It’s just that some people think that the Russians shouldn’t have reacted to the atrocities committed to them by the Chinese so violently. They should have turned the other cheek. Besides, it’s quite obvious that the Chinese that lived on our side of the river suffered innocently and couldn’t be blamed directly for anything. The hostile actions of their countrymen from the other side of the river simply cost them their lives.

There are no holds barred while fighting against the deadly enemy.

I don’t see the Jews, Gypsies, darkies [*khatchiki*] and Chinese as people, they should all be done away with, and the Americans too. Sorry for such open racism, but I couldn’t write just another stupid post anymore.

And another, more educated person wrote about the ones responsible for “the Blagoveshchensk utopia” as follows:

They were REAL PEOPLE, unlike this “humanistic” mold nowadays. PEOPLE with clear national identity, spiritual nature, and high morale. PEOPLE who knew all about real life with its cruelty and inevitability to either win or lose. Not like people today, resembling domestic plants ... afraid of any real difficulties life could bring and not used to struggle for their own living space when they find themselves in other than room temperature, unwatered and withering.

The Katyn massacre is a crime committed by the humane Stalinist regime because ONLY 2000 Polish officers were executed, and others were spared for some reasons. OURS liquidated NOT OURS. It's all right. What isn't right is that they didn't kill all the enemies. And then these who survived in Poland were later, in 1944 and 1945, shooting our soldiers from behind, meanly and secretly.”

Moreover, there is ruthless argument concerning the organization of the incident delivered by admittedly marginal—but still—politicians representing radical nationalistic views:³⁰

This is the example of a method for deporting foreigners spontaneously. First, there is a national response to them and then a state intervention—when all who survived are deported for the purpose of “saving their lives.”

At the beginning of my paper I mentioned the inadequacy of quantitative interpretation of the set of responses, comments and discussions on the subject collected as a result of my Internet search. They are interesting and significant as such but not as a *quantitative* indicator of public feeling represented by the whole society or its particular part. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that these attitudes are marginal compared to the whole body of discussions, and that they do not evoke sympathies among the majority of participants. Much more frequently one can read sarcastic or angry replies addressed to the “fascists” (*fashiki*) or “Nazis” (*natsiki*). “ANY Nazis are crap. Russian, Lithuanian, Jewish, English, Arab, Georgian, American, Abkhazian, Chinese, or Black ones—just A-N-Y.”

Another aspect, however, has been discussed a lot more widely. Why should we recall it at all? Is taking skeletons out of the closet worth doing? After all, every nation has some of its own.

³⁰ The site entitled *Chernaya sotnya. Vserossiiskaya Pravoslavnaya patrioticheskaya organizatsiya Chernaya Sotnya* (<http://www.sotnia.ru/forum/viewtopic.php?f=8&t=11590&start=30>). Access date: May 9, 2012).

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You must admit that this incident is by no means the most important episode in Russian history. Nonetheless, virtually every book regarding Chinese-Russian relations describes the events in considerable detail.

Why reopen old wounds? It is bad for public well-being.

It is perfectly natural that in the history curriculum nobody would burden the shaping character of these young souls with such kind of shit done by their ancestors. Unfortunately, there was a tendency to do that once in Russia. Surely, according to our version of history we have always been right, or at least we've meant well. In reality, however, our ancestors sometimes did things that didn't do them any credit and do not make us proud of them. It's just that usually such events are not the center of attention and tend to be avoided in discussions. Genocide and pogroms were once conducted by us as well, although not always entirely consciously. Thus, we have had everything in our history, including massacres of foreigners.

But why, in the long run, should we give the Chinese a reason for retaliation? Especially considering the fact that they have always remembered every detail and kept a record of everything. And one day they will settle a score.

I've heard, but not seen, that apparently on the night of July 2, into the next day, the Chinese put little boats with candles on the water from their Amur bank. Each symbolizes a soul of someone who died during this conflict.

I have recently talked to a Russian guy who is a professional Chinese translator. He told me that the Chinese know about the massacre, they remember about it and will settle a score when they have a chance.

They can harbor a grudge in their hearts for a very long time! they are awfully unforgiving! God forbid if we were to find out about all the hatred that representatives of this nation might be consumed with..." "right now nobody remembers the reasons for it, but the wish to recall them is always present in Asians' hearts ... there are almost 2 billion of them and dozens of times less of us in the world ... and may their missiles miss their targets, may they be copied from ours and of poor quality ... but perhaps it is really high time we thought about their missiles, soldiers and targets instead of stupidly buying ourselves out from time to time ... let's hope we won't need to organize another "utopia," its outcome's not gonna be that predictable this time.

And there are actually some doubts as regards the possibility of "settling a score" and "the inherently unforgiving nature of the Chinese."

Compared to that the Chinese are a model of moderation and peacefulness. Even the above-described pogrom, in fact a massacre—has it often been mentioned in international talks? Does anyone bear any

grudges? Or is anybody making any claims? Their gentleness is simply amazing compared to someone else's.

The other side remembers everything very well. But it has gotten used to it and since it also slaughtered their own people the way no one else had ever done, and committed genocides itself—not due to some excesses of the ones who were merely given orders, but as organized campaigns supervised by the government. But it's not even that. The last thing China would do is to bear grudges against the Russian Federation in 2010 for the fact that a few hundred people on the edge of the Russian Empire decided to get rid of the enemy subjects inhabiting their country the simplest way possible and they weren't punished for it by the authorities.

In any case, “there is a museum devoted to this tragedy in Kheikhe. And they teach about it in schools.” There are quite a lot of rumors about the museum, but everyone says that Russians are not allowed to visit it. It creates an atmosphere of a mysterious and vague threat. Perhaps an essay written by a French journalist for a popular Russian journal will relieve it to a certain extent.

Coming back to Kheikhe we stop at the ruins of the old town of Aigun' ... An ultracontemporary building has been built in place of the old fortress—it is a historical museum. The driver says that Russians are not allowed to get in, but a French woman should have no problem with that. The entrance is to the right side of the vestibule: we can hear someone shouting and shooting, and the tragic tone of the speaker's voice coming from behind a heavy curtain made of red velvet. A warden lets me into a dark room with all the light focused on a panoramic group painting at the opposite end—it shows Blagoveshchensk in 1900 in the heat of the Boxer Uprising. There is a model in the foreground: toy-like Cossacks force the Chinese into the water at the Russian Amur bank; houses are burning, there are corpses everywhere, women and children are drowning in the river. One does not need to speak Chinese. It is clear what is happening, no need for the commentator.³¹

And the important thing is not so much that Chinese children have been learning about it at school from the very start; it is a symbolic event for everyone. The crucial thing is that WE have no idea about it. Psychologically Russians are not ready for being accused of this incident. And this is a blazing failure. In my opinion it is always better to know EVERYTHING you might pay dearly for some day. And it's better to know it in advance.

To know in order to be ready for the approaching danger—it is only one of many arguments. And a considerably marginal one. One should also know and remember for his or her own use.

³¹ Patrisiya Shishmanova, *Bereg byvshikh russkikh*, “Vokrug sveta,” No. 3, March 2011, (<http://www.vokrugsveta.ru/vs/article/7374>. Access date: May 9, 2012)

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I am 125 years younger than Blagoveshchensk. One could wonder—why should I bury myself so deep in the past? Is it necessary for my generation at all? It sure is! We need to know all about things that not a long time ago were still left unsaid.³²

It was a shameful incident and one should be aware of it.

A terrible forgotten tragedy. And how little we know about our own and quite recent history!

One really needs to remember the lessons taught by history. And the fact that, first of all, the Blagoveshchensk massacre resulted from criminal actions and indifference of the authorities and secondly, Russians' striving for cheap workforce harmed their own countrymen. And the latter is still true nowadays.

It is necessary to know and remember in order to understand and explain, and draw conclusions not only regarding our ancestors, but also us, our society and the time we live in. And attempts to understand outnumber these to judge. “Why indeed did it happen that way?”—this is the essential stimulus for thinking and a motif of discussions. And one needs to figure it out individually, distancing herself or himself from the content of this article and simultaneously analyzing and criticizing it. One should search the Internet looking for other sources of information, compare the facts, find the basis for his or her own version and interpretation of the events. Criticism of the paper in question can be entirely professional—some comments instantly reveal a confident style of a good specialist in the humanities. They accuse the author of the lack of references to archive material, showing the situation out of its context, too benevolent an attitude towards the Russo-Chinese relations in the Far East (the subject of atrocities committed by the *Honghuzi* crops up immediately), and of giving an exaggerated number of the killed Chinese. More frequently, however, the comments come from conscientious amateur enthusiasts using one basic research tool—their common sense. They also contribute to exceptionally interesting discussions about the reasons why masses of people behaved so passively while facing inevitable death, the possibility to swim across the Amur at that time of the year, and political and ideological involvement shown by the author of the article. The most interesting thing to a researcher is their referring to their own experience or recollections of their families and friends. They often ask professionals to comment on the article and evaluate both the paper and the situation. “The article is interesting, but let us have some opinions from orientalists.”

³² R. Kostenko, *Uchenik Aivazovskogo zapechatlel oboronu Blagoveshchenska*, “Amurskaya pravda,” April 13, 2007.

Given such an attitude and sincere intentions to figure out the truth the aspect of eternal collective responsibility of nations seems to disappear or stay in the background.

Every, repeat EVERY nation has a sufficient number of scumbags, sadists, or simply people capable of cruelty when “in a crowd.” And EVERY SINGLE nation has something like that in their history. But to judge the whole nation based on that is vileness.

Nationalism happens to any nation in general. For centuries people treat foreigners suspiciously, and if such a foreigner happened to stir things up when “visiting,” there was a lot of fuss right away and people were ready to kill all and everyone having dark skin, slanting eyes or dark face.

But what were the motives of the people who took part in the events directly or indirectly and the logic behind their actions? From different points of view they were the following:

The then incumbent Governor of Blagoveshchensk can be understood, he simply had no other choice, but to deport the Chinese to the other bank of the Amur, because of what they could do to support the Yihetuan, willingly or forcibly. It's difficult to judge, nobody knows for sure if the Chinese inhabitants of Blagoveshchensk were the fifth column... .. We cannot blame anyone either—decide who's guilty and who's not, wartime is wartime, you know.

They keep crossing swords proving the Russians' passion for genocide, but they have no slightest idea why it happened. Put yourselves in the shoes of that officer who decided to conduct the operation. To begin with, you have 10 times less soldiers, people are panicking, Chinese bandits are aggressive and have the support from the Chinese “newcomers”. Objective No. 1—to deprive them of that support and avoid a blow in the back. Something needs to be done. Variant No. 1—to gather all the Chinese in one place, but there are too few soldiers and the Chinese would need to be fed and guarded ... Variant No. 2—to do away with them all. Inhumane. So they needed to be deported. ... my grandmother comes from the area and she once told me that during the Russian Civil War local inhabitants were more afraid of the Chinese than of the White or the Red. ... What deserves a reproach is overestimation of that factor and poor organization of the river crossing. An again, the officer found himself under extreme time pressure, without soldiers at his disposal, and feeling gigantic responsibility for the colonists and his own people. That is why we should not be the ones to judge that man's actions, as well as the ones taken by people like Budanov, Ul'man and Arakcheev. They were doing their job and defending us.

War is war and it goes by its own rules, and the city authorities were responsible for the residents and their country. Therefore, the events are viewed as an incident of a wartime, the sad result of taking the necessary

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measures of self-defense. There is no one to blame and to a different extent everyone is a victim.

Such a refusal to reflect upon guilt—or an objection to it—has not generally been found satisfactory.

Why were our people so cruel? For any particular reason? Nobody knows. But Russians are no better or worse than other nations that create and destroy. The best example are the Germans. A strong cultural and humanist layer (sorry for the awkward expression) on the one hand, and fascism, cold-blooded and calculated murders of civilians on the other. And we are actually the same. Ready to give our lives for our family members and friends and take the life of someone else, equally close. And in a bestial way. The Russian Civil War can serve as the best example, because the Russians decimated their own countrymen particularly cruelly. The Chinese are no different. They write poems and make up new tortures.

And the hopeless thing is that “all people are sinners, and it’s not gonna be any better on this earth.”

The text I have found especially important and interesting was quite obviously written by a high-class specialist in humanities. He offered his unique and absolutely amazing version of the reasons why the participants of the events behaved exactly the way they did. This truly needs a broad quotation:

The Blagoveshchensk genocide was committed by the lower parts of the nation (by minor executors coming from the nation, with the sympathy of the nation itself), on the outskirts of the Empire, and AGAINST the authorities’ will, even on the city level, against any law. According to that law—as the local authorities asserted and swore—no harm should have been done to the Chinese (apart from their being deported from the country, just in case—but after all, this is perfectly normal during the war); in other locations where the law was obeyed more carefully, the Chinese were left untouched ... The passive response and behavior of the authorities, from the city ones and higher, did not result from normality/abnormality of the law or the system, but from extensive decay of the elite ... After all, the instruction to drown the Chinese was not given by the superiors. It is the people and the lowest-class executioners who made that decision. The authorities, including the city ones, intended to use absolutely normal methods, i.e. the deportation of the enemy subjects posing a potential threat to the country of the enemy. The closing of the case that followed is not an effect of the corrupted law or system, but the wrongdoing of their representatives. And that makes the disintegration even more terrifying ... It is surprising when they write about the psychosis of city residents, xenophobia, etc. in relation to the Blagoveshchensk story. After all, there was nothing like that present, similarly as there was no hatred for the Chinese. ... There is a city, or in

fact a town, in the wilderness, on the outskirts of the Empire, bordering with a world power Russia has not been at war for 200 years. 10 per cent of the city residents (ca. 5 thousand) are subjects of this world power. And suddenly bang—and a war breaks out with the world power in question and the 5 thousand turn out to be subjects of the enemy. They cannot be controlled and hardly anyone speaks their language, so if 500 of them decided to organize a rebellion and attack the city authorities, it would be hardly possible to trace it and extremely hard to stop or suppress. At the same time the city is approached by military forces of the world power in question that open fire on it. If the units decided to attack supported by a few hundred potential rebels the result could be tragic to the city. At the time of war enemy subjects are usually interned or deported. In this case the city authorities decided to do the latter, which was a perfectly normal solution (the future showed that it could be avoided but considering the risk, the decision was perfectly justifiable). Nevertheless, it was impossible to intern these residents or send them somewhere far from the war zone. And this was the way it began: since the evacuation of the Chinese was problematic, the ones who conducted the orders simply liquidated them. Just like that. It had nothing in common with a mass psychosis, or any psychosis at all. It was just the simplest and the most effective solution of the problem—that is, to the people who had no restraints to do that. For safety purposes it is desirable to deal with or somehow preventively neutralize the subjects of the enemy when the city has been approached by enemy forces, isn't it? Oh, yes, indeed. And how can it be done the simplest and most effective way if one is ready to do it by fair means or foul? Well, by slaughtering them. And that is just what they decided to do, without any psychosis. And the local Cossack authorities never intended to evacuate the Chinese. They immediately decided to do away with them. Just to get rid of the problem. And in other borderline locations the authorities (Cossack and others) did no such thing whatsoever, proving to be stronger and more humane. Why did they kill women and children, too? They would certainly not participate in any uprising. Well, just like that. If they did away with the men, what were they supposed to do with the rest, and why should they even bother to save them? There was neither a psychosis, nor xenophobia or hatred. It was pure common sense combined with experience, the executioners' desire to spare themselves and the resources, their understandable concern about their country's safety during wartime, and the absence of structural barriers that could limit the manifestation of all the above-mentioned qualities—highly beneficial and having nothing in common with irrationalism and xenophobia.

This version of the events seems the closest to the picture of a classical pogrom.

It is complemented by an analysis conducted by another author:

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Somebody considered the object of violence highly important. The Chinese were perceived as ‘aliens’ ... Psychology calls such a process ‘dehumanization’ of the enemy. This is the explanation for people’s ability to act with such surprising cruelty.

The above intellectual analysis is supplemented with the following “cry-of-the-soul” judgment:

The incident is totally shocking. The first thing that comes to one’s mind is that so little has changed for the last 110 years—people are afraid of the Chinese now, just as they used to be back then. And they still consider them the lower race. Of course, not everyone thinks the same way, but such kind of attitude is clearly noticeable among Russian tourists in China. The fact that Russia is a pseudo-Orthodox country now and it was like that at that time has nothing in common with the Christian spirit. What was swept under the carpet back then still seems to be concealed. This is extremely scary ... Any recurrence like that is terrifying. Another thing is that this bestiality was worse than Beslan, Pearl Harbor or the Twin Towers of New York. There were more victims here, and they included defenseless civilians. I can’t even imagine what a monster one needs to be to split an old man’s head with an axe just because he cannot catch up with others. This is not a remote explosion, this is cruel bloodshed. And the great harm was not done by single bands of terrorists—it was a mass phenomenon since the whole society supported the massacre, and this is actually the most terrifying. Even the ‘noble officers’ representing the ‘sublime intelligentsia’ showed that their rotten uniform is more important than the cries of tortured victims and Christian values. And traditionally, they could plunder the victims’ possessions making hay while the sun shines. This is so standard. And isn’t it nasty to bring the bloody money home? One can explain the events with fear, but the plundering that followed showed moral degradation of the whole society. One can assume that the properties were pillaged by greedy ordinary people, but the police who were supposed to protect them also participated. Thus, considering that attitude towards people’s individual and property rights, the law, and moral values in all social classes, it becomes evident that a bloody revolution was just a question of time. And nothing has changed.

The evaluation of the authorities’ actions or passivity seems to run through all discussions. There is virtually no approval, but simultaneously there is a clearly expressed desire to justify. A predominant tendency, however, is the one of criticism and judgment. And the range of criticism is extremely wide: from accusations of weakness and incompetence (criminal inactivity) to the ones of committing a genocide and a war crime (criminal activity). Another thing that has been emphasized and judged accordingly is the intention to hush the case up without disgracing the uniform.

The issue of the authorities is generally clear. There are hardly any illusions regarding their actions. And the attitude towards the state has always remained the same—it is blamed and made responsible for everything, even for things it was not guilty of.

But I'm more interested in something else: the quietness of the Russian public opinion. After all, they were not peasants. I think it was a very bad sign indicating a serious illness of the Russian Empire and the Russian society. But we know anyway that there isn't much time left till the end comes.

But the peasants (i.e. the lower class of the society) and their historical memory are not a simple issue. On the one hand, "my father born in 1926 who grew up in Blagoveshchensk had no idea about the subject and couldn't say anything about it." On the other,

Grandpa Parygin told us about it when we were children. And from what he said we could feel that the Cossacks were deeply affected by their participation in that operation.

I found out about these events from my grandma who lived in Blagoveshchensk at the beginning of the previous century. (...) She did not witness the massacre herself, because she was born eight years later. But she remembered the Chinese living in the pre-revolutionary city (they returned a few years after the slaughter) and she always regarded them as extremely decent people—who did not cheat children in their shops—and hard-working, too. She couldn't explain how and why they suddenly decided to expel foreigners from the city. I long considered her stories as exaggerated or even invented, and then I simply forgot all about them.

Finally, an analysis conducted by a professional researcher deserves special attention:

V.I. Dyatlov, the author of an excellent article about the Blagoveshchensk case, is not right thinking that it was later completely forgotten. It was recalled by Transbaikalian Cossacks whose units took part in this genocide. Nikolai Ivanovich Bogomyakov, a Transbaikalian Cossack who was the only one left from the family liquidated in Stalin's time (he himself was imprisoned for 26 years in the Stalin and Khrushchev era and died in 1983) and wrote under the pseudonym of Serebryakov, was the author of a book entitled *Nachalo i konets Zabaikal'skogo voiska* (partially published) based mostly on the recollections of Transbaikalian Cossacks he encountered. ... Both he and many of his sources were convinced that the tragic destruction of Transbaikalian Cossacks was a kind of boomerang of fate, i.e. its merciless punishment for their cruelties, mainly of the early 20th century, especially the ones of 1900 and 1904 against the Chinese, particularly the Blagoveshchensk incident. They did not see it as a sign of justice—just as the

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principles of the universe where cruelties are later experienced by the ones who once caused them. . . . The general spirit of the statements was: ‘we had done the most bestial and shameful things and we got what we deserved.’ These bestial and shameful things are evil and disgraceful as such, ethically, not technically—according to Bogomyakov and some of his sources—since they all had to suffer for them.

Instead of Conclusions. The Issue of Topicality

All the sources quoted above (and the unquoted as well, I can assure you) are full of emotions. One can even talk about intense passions. There are no (or—just in case—hardly any) indifferent or intellectually distanced responses and comments. The prevailing reactions are ostentatious manifestations of people’s lists of personal values, ideological and sometimes political viewpoints. Even seemingly rigid in terms of form and analytical texts have not managed to avoid passionate judgment.

Attempts to find the reason for this situation inevitably reveal that it is the nature of the events itself. Reading about the latter one finds it really difficult to remain indifferent. Nonetheless, over a century has passed since the incident. It is a whole era of numerous mass cruelties, conscious and cold-blooded exterminations of millions of people. And of getting used to such atrocities.

What scares us here is the common nature of the events, the realization that such unnatural and monstrous violence can be used by the “neighbors”³³, ordinary people we live close to, associate and form various relationships with. And not some invisible external powers that do not augur well. From the abstract sphere of anonymity and statistics showing human losses counted in millions violence enters the sphere of everyday life. The daily and familiar word “neighbor” gains a terrifying metaphorical meaning.

Therefore, the dominant notion is to understand or perceive this subject, and problem, as extremely topical and contemporary. And it is not only from the perspective of a potential recurrence of the situation—after all the state is in decay, there is a popular anti-migrant feeling and there have been numerous acts of violence against “foreign intruders.”

The first question that comes to your mind is ‘Is it possible at all these days?’ And then you start asking yourself: ‘Is it possible anywhere else outside

³³ Ya.T. Gross, *Sosedi. Istoriya unichtozheniya evreiskogo mestechka*, translated from Polish by V. S. Kulagina-Yartseva, Foreword by A. Michnik, Moscow: “Tekst,” *Druzhba narodov*; 2002.

Russia?' My answer is—it is possible everywhere, where the government evades its responsibility; the range of pogroms can only be determined by the extent of passivity displayed by the authorities. Unfortunately, there are always people who want to liquidate others.

It is understandable, and terrifying. “Knock on wood but I am really scared of this barely controlled aggression. Someone will do nothing but scream but someone else might as well take out a knife.” And the conclusion follows: “The Blagoveshchensk catastrophe was Russia’s first step into the Time of Troubles.”

But it is mainly about us. How should *we now* live with the memory of this incident? “I wonder if we are ripe for showing repentance/apologizing for exterminating a few thousand innocent Chinese near Blagoveshchensk in 1900.” Repentance is understood not as a collective externally-inflicted guilt complex but as an inner emotion and taking inner moral responsibility for the ancestors’ actions. For the inheritance that cannot and must not be denied. Repentance is the only reliable guarantee that the past actions will not be repeated. It is an indicator of the society’s maturity. And a transition from the issues of collective resistance or collective responsibility to individual choices.

Maciej Janowski wrote about a reaction of the Polish society to the situation described in the book by J.T. Gross:

... to take note of it without trying to deny it and live on conscious of the fact that your own people, like any other, have good and bad, beautiful and nasty pages in their history.³⁴

Similarly to the situation in Poland, it is not the only position and not the prevailing one in the discussion.

Still today, some believe that recognizing the dark pages of national history is a reflection of social maturity and a moral obligation, while others are convinced that defending the good name of the people is a fundamental obligation of patriotism. Because both positions are founded not on empirical knowledge, but on principles of worldview, it would be a mistake to believe that they could be altered by historical study.³⁵

Indeed, but historical research can attract public attention to the problem in question, provoke a discussion, face people with issues that cannot be dismissed. It can offer people words and images they sometimes need so badly. Naturally, the reaction to the Blagoveshchensk events in

³⁴ M. Janowski, *Jedwabne, July 10, 1941: A Discussion of the Events of a Day of Horror*, “Pro et Contra,” May–August 2011, p. 155 [quoted from the Russian translation].

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

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Russian contemporary society cannot be compared with Poland’s response to the Jedwabne massacre—in terms of the scope of discussion, the possibility to avoid moral, axiological and ideological choices, or the depth of understanding. But the fact that the subject has been restored to historical memory and that it does not leave the ones aware of it indifferent instills some optimism.

Victor Dyatlov

“Blagoveshensk Utopia”: Historical Memory and Historical Responsibility

Abstract

Tragic events in 1900 in Blegoveshensk suddenly became the subject of active internet and mass media discussions. The problem of historical responsibility and historical memory spontaneously appears, being discussed and what is more important being relived. Did it really happen? Who is to blame? Could our forefathers do this? If yes then why? How should we, their descendants react? Should we? Should we remember and recall the terrible and shameful events? Should we take the skeletons out from the cupboards? It should be mentioned that this topic is of great interest in China. Won’t it be harmful for the interest of our country and for the presently living generation to mention about these events? Are we responsible for everything that our forefathers did? If yes, then in what way? Can be a nation to blame? Are there bad nations? Should some nations be always historically guilty towards other nations? Should there be collective responsibility? Up to juridical consequences? Is it possible to understand and explain what had happened and behavior of those ones who took part directly or indirectly? What does it mean to learn a lesson? Is it a duty or personal reflection to confess?

Key words: historical memory, historical responsibility, Blegoveshensk, Russia, China.