

Tatyana N. Sorokina  
F.M. Dostoevsky State University, Omsk

## “The Blagoveshchensk Panic” of the Year 1900: the Version of the Authorities

“In fact everything did not happen the way it really did.”  
Stanisław Jerzy Lec

People have called these events differently: the Chinese “siege” or “bombardment” of Blagoveshchensk, simply “wartime events on the Amur River,” “the Blagoveshchensk Panic,” “the bloody days,” or “a shocking crime.” They tragically culminated in a deportation of the Chinese inhabiting Blagoveshchensk and the neighboring area, carried out using horrifying means and—thanks to an anonymous author writing for *Vestnik Evropy*—known as the Blagoveshchensk “Utopia.”<sup>1</sup> It was an extreme and salutary example of a situation resulting from incompetence or even total paralysis of the authorities in times of crisis. Initially, the events deeply moved the general public to be later completely forgotten and remembered again in a hundred years.

After decades of silence in the Soviet era the events have gradually become a subject of studies conducted by Russian researchers. Some authors consider them as an incident of the war between Russia and China in 1900 or as an episode in the history of Russo-Chinese relations.<sup>2</sup> Others analyze

<sup>1</sup> V., *Blagoveshchenskaya “Utopiya,”* “*Vestnik Evropy,*” 1910, No. 7, pp. 231-241.

<sup>2</sup> V.G. Datsyshen, *Russko-Kitaiskaya voina. Man'chzhuriya 1900 g.,* Vol. 1: *Boevye deistviya na sukhopytnom fronte,* Saint Petersburg 1996, pp. 89-93. V.G. Datsyshen, *Istoriya rossiisko-kitaiskikh otnoshenii v kontse XIX–nachale XX vv.,* Krasnoyarsk 2000; V. G. Datsyshen, *Bokherskaya voina. Voennaya kampaniya russkoi armii i flota v Kitae v 1900–1901 gg.,* Krasnoyarsk 2001, pp. 208-217; V.G. Datsyshen, *Istoriya russko-kitaiskikh otnoshenii (1618–1917 gg.). Uchebnoe posobie,* Krasnoyarsk 2004, pp. 146-149; I.M. Popov, *Rossiya i kitai: 300 let na grani voiny,* Moscow 2004, pp. 281-284; O. A. Timofeev, *Rossiisko-kitaiskie otnosheniya v Priamure (seredina XIX–nachalo XX vv.),* Blagoveshchensk 2003, [http://igpi.ru/center/lib/hist\\_tradit/east/china/timofeev1.html](http://igpi.ru/center/lib/hist_tradit/east/china/timofeev1.html) etc.

them as a fragment of the history of the Chinese in Russia.<sup>3</sup> N.I. Dubinina mentioned the events in question in her book devoted to the Amur Region (*Priamur'e*) Governor General N.I. Grodekov.<sup>4</sup> In A.V. Usova's dissertation the events in Blagoveshchensk are seen from the angle of the Zeya River Manchurians' (*zazeiskie man'chzhury*) fate.<sup>5</sup> V.I. Dyatlov in turn is more interested in the impact of the "yellow danger" syndrome on the inhabitants of the Far-Eastern regions of the Empire and the reasons why these events have actually been forgotten.<sup>6</sup>

The latter paper deserves special attention since the issues it covers have been vividly discussed in the Internet. Another unquestionable manifestation of a growing interest in the subject are publications issued for the anniversary of the Amur Province (*Amurskaya oblast*), especially the collection including both contemporary papers and reprints of older articles and photographs. As the annotation says,

The publication throws light on the events that happened in Russian Priamur'e and China during the Boxer (Yihetuan) Rebellion. It was the most difficult period in centuries-long, traditionally friendly relations between the two world powers. For a number of historical reasons there are too few credible accounts of this tragic conflict available, both in Russia and China. This book has to a certain extent filled the gap.<sup>7</sup>

More recent publications concerning the history of Blagoveshchensk, the Amur Cossacks and governors have also brought up the subject.

### **“Wartime is Wartime” — “The Panic” — “The Bloody Days”**

Contemporaries witnessing the events and their descendants viewed them quite differently. The names alone used to refer to them are quite significant: “the Blagoveshchensk Panic,” “the Chinese siege of Blagoveshchensk,” “the wartime events on the Amur,” “the bloody days,” or “the Blagoveshchensk ‘Utopia’.”

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<sup>3</sup> A.G. Larin, *Kitaitsy v Rossii vchera i segodniya: istoricheskii ocherk*, Moscow 2003, pp. 41-42; A.G. Larin, *Kitaiskie migranty v Rosii. Istoriya i sovremennost'*, Moscow 2009, pp. 43-44; A.I. Petrov, *Istoriya kitaitsev v Rossii. 1856–1917 gody*, Saint Petersburg, pp. 328-338.

<sup>4</sup> N.I. Dubinina Дубинина, *Priamurskii general gubernator N. I. Grodekov. Istoriko-biograficheskii ocherk*, Khabarovsk 2001.

<sup>5</sup> A.V. Usova, *Istoriya kitaitsev, man'chzhurov i daurozazeiskogo kraia vo vtoroi polovine XIX veka*, abstract of the Ph.D. thesis, Moscow 2005.

<sup>6</sup> V. Dyatlov, *Blagoveshchenskaya “Utopiya.” iz istorii materializatsii fobii*, “Vestnik Evrazii,” 2002, No. 4, pp. 84-103.

<sup>7</sup> *Voennye sobyitiya v Priamur'e. 1900-1902: Posvashchaetsya 150-letiyu Amurskoi oblasti*, Blagoveshchensk na Amure 2008, p. 312, <http://www.amurfair.ru/book-nal/page/1/>

Generally, three major points of view can be specified, all of them taken—more or less explicitly—by the contemporaries judging the events. Using the political commentary style of the time, we could metaphorically call them “wartime is wartime,” “the bloody days,” and “the panic.” The first two terms are opposing: on the one hand there were people who—although being against war cruelties—justified the events in question with wartime conditions (“wartime is wartime”), on the other—all those who accused the authorities and society for what had been done, thinking that there could be no excuse for such a “terrifying crime” (“the bloody days” or “we cannot be forgiven”). O.A. Timofeev claimed that

... the Blagoveshchensk authors A.V. Kirkhner and N.Z. Golubtsov concentrate in their works on the episodes of Russian soldiers’ and officers’ wartime glory and courage, ignoring their war crimes or justifying them with the fact that it was the Chinese who “started treacherous bombardment of the defenseless and unarmed city,” whereas representatives of a social and liberal trend in Russian journalism—both in the capital and from the émigré community—such as L.G. Deich and the authors of the article entitled “The Bolshevik ‘Utopia’” devoted special attention to deliberations on peaceful Chinese inhabitants, quite fairly putting part of the blame on the Priamur’e authorities.<sup>8</sup>

Another group included these who kept trying to understand and explain—if not justify—what had happened (“the Blagoveshchensk panic”). As a Blagoveshchensk female resident recalled,

... back then Russian press wrote enough about that hard time, either prizing the Blagoveshchensk citizens for acting so vigorously: “once forgotten always forgotten” or accusing them of inhumane and barbaric attitude towards the “peaceful” Chinese. *There was no golden mean!* [my emphasis—T.S.]<sup>9</sup>

In her opinion it was a necessity imposed by the situation and—what is more—the only possible solution.

Researchers at that time expressed their different views similarly. According to A.G. Larin,

... the city authorities decided to displace the Chinese to the other side of the Amur in order to deprive the enemy of their potential allies on our side of the river, and they did it hastily in a few days from the beginning of military activity. Unfortunately, judging from what has been written, *the*

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<sup>8</sup> O.A. Timofeev, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> K. Nikitina, *Osada Blagoveshchenska kitaitsami v 1900 godu (Iz vospominanii)*, “Istoricheskii vestnik,” 1910, October, p. 222.

operation—*perhaps logical during wartime*—was conducted with the use of cruel means.<sup>10</sup>

The attitude described here using the term “the bloody days” has found a larger representation in the press. The following quotation from *Amurskii komsomolets* can be considered a typical one:

103 years ago the Blagoveshchensk Cossacks killed about five thousand of the Chinese. The latter were forced with bayonets into the ice-cold and churned up water of the Amur—the Black Dragon River. Almost all of them drowned. Those who actively resisted were killed on the spot. This was the way the Russians marked their rule in this region of Eastern Asia—they pushed the Chinese inhabitants behind the border that Russia had established. Nowadays it is hardly remembered ...<sup>11</sup>

But what is “the ice-cold and churned up water of the Amur” in the height of July heat! Some researchers tend to share such kind of an attitude. O. A. Timofeev assumed that

... many local administration members were flooded with a tide of *chauvinism* caused by the start of military activity ... And the most vulnerable targets of any war are the civilians who not only become accidental victims, but also face *genocide* initiated by the enemy government. In 1900 the authorities of the Amur Province gave that kind of a negative example.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, there are also these who support the “panic” theory. V.G. Datsyshen was inclined to think that

... there are no grounds for considering the extermination of the Chinese as planned. Obviously, the main reason for the situation was *fear*. It was the first time that the Russian inhabitants of the Amur area faced the real threat of a war with China. That fear left common people with no place for compassion in their souls. And that was what enabled the ones who followed nothing but their animal instincts to act without control. Unfortunately, many of them had already come to power.<sup>13</sup>

The same author also wrote that “the mass murder of the Chinese at the Amur River was caused by the *panic* that had seized the Russian inhabitants,

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<sup>10</sup> A.G. Larin, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in: N.P. Ryzhova, *Transgranichnyi narodnyi rynek va Blagoveshchenske/Kheikhe*, In: “Most cherez Amur”. *Vheshnie migratsii i migranty v Sibirii i na Dal'nem Vostoke*, Natalis, Moscow, Irkutsk 2004, p. 160.

<sup>12</sup> O.A. Timofeev, *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> V.G. Datsyshen, *Russko-Kitaiskaia voina*, p. 93.

as well as the interests and lack of professionalism shown by the local authorities.”<sup>14</sup>

Other authors in turn only intended to state the facts suggesting their readers to assess the situation by themselves. Nonetheless, even this kind of attitude allows to analyze the choice of factual material for presentation, since reconstructing events strongly depends on the selection of sources.

## Two Sources—One Version

The factual side of the events is widely known and precisely described, both in official sources and in memories written by their contemporaries. One can access archival documents (especially the ones from the Russian State Historical Archive for the Far East), special collections of documents and materials concerning the war events of 1900 in the Amur River area, periodicals, particularly Blagoveshchensk newspapers, as well as witnesses' memoirs and other pre-revolutionary publications.

The majority of references have been made to two sources. The first one is *The Story of an Eyewitness*, i.e. the memoirs of an exiled social democrat L.G. Deich published in two versions under different names (of Sonin and L.G. Deich) and titles (*The Chinese Bombardment of Blagoveshchensk* and *The Bloody Days*).<sup>15</sup> The second source is an article entitled *The Blagoveshchensk “Utopia”* published in the local newspaper “Vestnik Evropy.” V.I. Dyatlov maintains that the anonymous author of the latter “gives the most thorough reconstruction” of the events in question and that the memoirs written by Sonin, their eyewitness, make the description complete.<sup>16</sup>

Referring to the above texts A.O. Timofeev wrote that contrarily to Blagoveshchensk authors “linked to the authorities” “numerous works published in St. Petersburg and in exile displayed an attitude diametrically opposed to the ones displayed by N.I. Grodekov, the Governor-General of Priamur’e and K.N. Gribskii, the War Governor of the Amur Oblast.”<sup>17</sup> According to A.I. Petrov, “the testimonies of two eyewitnesses of the Amur River events, both of them foreigners, represent unquestionable value. They included Leo Deich (his story, by the way, was described by A. Malozemov as

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<sup>14</sup> V.G. Datsyshen, *Istoriya russko-kitaiskikh otnoshenii*, p. 146.

<sup>15</sup> Sonin, *Bombardirovka Blagoveshchenska kitaitami (rasskaz ochevidtza)*, “Zari,” No. 4, B. m., B. g.; L. Deich, *Krovavye dni*, Saint Petersburg 1906; L. Deich, *16 let v Sibirii*, Moscow 1924, etc.

<sup>16</sup> V.I. Dyatlov, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>17</sup> O.A. Timofeev, *op. cit.*

‘the most important source of information about this event’) ...”<sup>18</sup> It is highly likely that Leo Deich, the Blagoveshchensk-based foreign correspondent working for “one of the newspapers,” and the exiled revolutionary Lev Grigor’evich Deich were in fact the same person.

The above publications are often referred to as the key sources of information for reconstructing the Blagoveshchensk events. Nonetheless, they have hardly been subject to critical analyses. We will make an attempt to fill this gap.

Whenever an expression “according to Deich” is used, it is usually without any reflection concerning the source of information offered by the latter. He gave descriptions of the events he had or could have witnessed—at the time he lived in Blagoveshchensk and worked as a journalist for the *Amurskii krai* newspaper (in fact, according to some evidence he was even its editor). As a correspondent he was present at a special meeting of the City Council called on July 2, shortly before the bombardment (and his recollections about that can serve as an excellent source of information about the “panic” among the city authorities), he witnessed the bombardment or siege of Blagoveshchensk by the Chinese, etc. He did not, however, witness the plundering or killing of the Chinese, and all the evil acts he later so emotionally described. What is more, Deich himself widely used such expressions as “*people have started talking that,*” “*as I have been told,*” “*they say,*” “*it is hard to determine,*” “*as it has been announced,*” “*according to reliable sources,*” etc.

For instance, his evidence for the misconduct of the police who plundered the possessions of the Chinese was as follows:

The thing is that after getting the Chinese subjects “across” the river their possessions remained under police protection before guardians were appointed. Certain police officers managed to turn them into a highly profitable source of income. It was *not hard to imagine a priori*, taking into account the unstable times and the fact that there were a few hundred of Chinese stores, shops and other establishments of the kind in Blagoveshchensk and the neighboring area with all kinds of possessions and commodities worth several million of rubles.

And the proof of the participation of the Amur Province War Governor in the plundering: “... *rumor had it that Shabanov was sharing profits with his generals. One cannot be sure how reliable it was, but apparently the situation was highly likely: it is quite difficult to imagine that such malpractice was conducted without the knowledge of the local despot,*”<sup>19</sup> etc.

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<sup>18</sup>A.I. Petrov, *op. cit.*, p. 329.

<sup>19</sup>L.G. Deich, *Krovavye dni*, pp. 22- 23.

And naturally, he could not be the eyewitness of the “river crossings” or have access to the investigation documents if only for the fact that he had left Blagoveshchensk before its termination was officially announced. Judging from his memoirs, he “started to find it very difficult to live in Blagoveshchensk where every street and almost every house reminded him of the masses of killed and robbed.” Therefore, he decided to leave the city for Vladivostok “right after the bombardment ceased”<sup>20</sup> and finally flee to Munich in 1901.

How did he know about the river crossings? His recollections offer an explanation:

Once, when I was sitting in my room working, Chkhotua rushed in, breathless and pale as death, and cried in a trembling voice: “Have you heard? They were all drowned!” “Who? Where?” I asked. “The Chinese! It’s a shame, what a dreadful crime!” David Ivanovich, with his deepest sense of decency, was brimming over with indignation. Peaceful and patient, an infinitely good man, he was yelling almost in a frenzy that he did no longer wish to know anyone who would try to justify that atrocious crime.<sup>21</sup>

To sum up, L.G. Deich witnessed what everyone else did: “I went to the river bank and saw a gruesome sight: there were masses of corpses floating on the Amur; they occupied such a considerable part of the river surface that it was impossible to count them.”<sup>22</sup> He could only make guesses or assumptions about everything else, judge from a whole lot of rumors circulating in Blagoveshchensk or from the news in the papers, etc. He could—to put it in contemporary terms—conduct a kind of “journalist’s inquiry,” after all, he worked for a local newspaper (“*I was asking all and everyone...*”<sup>23</sup>) but it is still difficult to assess the reliability of the facts he presented.

And the point is not about the fact that the majority of L.G. Deich’s account was based on rumors that did or did not correspond with the reality. I entirely admit that the latter might have surpassed the most terrifying “eyewitness stories.” Nevertheless, one cannot disregard the author’s tendentiousness and one-sidedness, as well as political orientation of his publications, the main objective of which was to expose the ruling regime represented by “the local despots.”

Apparently, to emphasize the result of the crime committed by the Priamur’s authorities L.G. Deich started with depicting an ideal image of

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<sup>20</sup> L.G. Deich, *16 let v Sibirii*, p. 375.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 372.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 373.

<sup>23</sup> L.G. Deich, *Krovavyye dni*, p. 18.

Chinese migrants and a no less idyllic picture of their relationships with the Russian inhabitants of remote areas:

The Chinese and Manchurians, incredibly limited in terms of their needs, had never even been reported to have committed minor offences, not to mention crimes. Their honesty, diligence and straightforwardness were commonly recognized features of their character, and Chinese subjects working as civil or domestic servants were commonly relied on and trusted in numerous institutions, various industrial companies as well as private residences. As they say, they were handy about the house and many Russian families that had young Chinese or Manchurian servants got attached to them and treated them like their own members. They were often taught to speak Russian and proved to be amazingly diligent: they studied Russian books or writing late into the night and thanks to such eagerness managed to make quick progress . . . . The relationships between the citizens of both countries were highly peaceful: both Russian and Chinese subjects were freely crossing the border and entering the neighboring country to visit each other, always showing mutual trust, with no precautions taken or passports controlled.<sup>24</sup>

This seems too much even for the most ardent defenders of “Yellow workforce” in the Far East. It is widely known that relationships with refugees from the neighboring eastern countries, including migrants from China, have always been—to put it mildly—complex and constituted the subject of particular concern of both local and central authorities from the moment Priamur’e and Primor’e were incorporated into Russia.

Ultimately, the whole revealing pathos represented by the exiled revolutionary and addressed to the Priamur’e local authorities was aimed against the Tsarist government:

The civilized world trembled when it first learned about the Blagoveshchensk atrocities. People found them exaggerated. Russian government agents were spreading rumors that they were nothing but fiction fabricated by vicious revolutionary anarchists. But the situation in Russia was progressing: what seemed unbelievable to the civilized world, even if happening in remote areas of Eastern Siberia, became reality in a number of cities in European Russia. Having started from the peaceful Chinese in 1900 people like Gribskii later turned against equally defenseless Jewish doctors, workers, Armenians, Poles, students, and the intelligentsia.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, summing up, to Deich the Blagoveshchensk events served as a reason to act against “people like Gribskii” on the whole-Russian scale. The objective to figure out what really happened receded into the background.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 4-5.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 32.



The anonymous author for *Vestnik Evropy* in turn was writing “using the material taken from official court records.”<sup>26</sup> Contrarily to the migrant L.G. Deich, he could not reveal his name, did not expand on the way he got access to the “court records” in question or describe them in a more exact manner. Presumably, V.G. Datsyshen later based on this material when referring to the case from the Amur Province War Governor’s Office; RGIADV (РГИАДВ, the Russian State Historical Archive for the Far East; f. 704. op. 6. d. 1134).

Some of the quotations he used completely coincided with the excerpts from “The Blagoveshchensk ‘Utopia.’” Both authors quote one of the telegrams sent by the head of military authorities Colonel Volkovinskii: “One must be a madman or out of one’s mind to ask what should be done with the Chinese; when they are ordered to be eliminated, they should be liquidated unquestioningly.”<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, however, both authors failed to specify the exact document they quoted. It is one thing if it was the wire itself, and another if it was someone’s account given during the investigation. Since none of the known researchers referring to the case No. 1134 described its contents or at least gave its full title, it is problematic to assess what sort of documents it included. Was it correspondence between the investigative bodies and the War Governor’s Office? Were they only investigation proceedings including interrogations of the accused and witnesses? Or were they notes and reports based on the latter? These questions remain unanswered.

While referring to the above-mentioned case, V.G. Datsyshen wrote: “The quickly commenced inquiry of all these facts resulted in a conclusion that ‘all the Chinese were nearly completely liquidated.’”<sup>28</sup> Numerous questions crop up immediately: What kind of document was it—the final investigation report or perhaps someone’s account? Was it signed and addressed to anyone? What was the reason for the investigation to come to such a conclusion? Who conducted the investigation? And so on. The case material is still waiting to be analyzed and currently it is impossible to claim with absolute certainty that they are the “official court archive” documents referred to by the anonymous author of *Vestnik Evropy*. Right now it can only be said that he had access to documents from the Amur Province War Governor’s Office rather than the “court archives.”

Let us assume that all the author’s quotations indeed came from the investigation documents (unfortunately, they lack references), all the more so because a great many facts given in the article were confirmed by other sources. Nonetheless, this information should not be viewed as “ultimate

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<sup>26</sup> V., *Blagoveschenskaya “Utopiya,”* p. 231.

<sup>27</sup> V.G. Datsyshen, *Russko-Kitaiskaia voina*, p. 92; V., *Blagoveshchenskaya “Utopiya,”* p. 238.

<sup>28</sup> V.G. Datsyshen, *Russko-Kitaiskaia voina*, p. 91.

truth” either. It is merely an interpretation of the events, just like the “account of the eyewitness” L.G. Deich. And as V.I. Dyatlov aptly observed, “their versions do not reveal any considerable differences.”<sup>29</sup> One can safely say that they actually represent the same version of the events, which—however—is not the only one.

Recently, certain documents from the Priamur’s Governor-General’s Office “With essential directives and announcements of putting the Chinese under protection during the disturbances of 1900, 1900–1902”<sup>30</sup> have been made available to researchers. They include material that, according to A. I. Petrov, appeared “sometime after” the events. In other words, the sources that constituted the basis for reports sent by the Amur Province authorities to Khabarovsk are not there.

Such material, however, can be found in the case entitled “On the Chinese crossing to the right bank of the Amur. (July 4, 1900–June 17, 1902)” from the Amur Province War Governor’s Office.<sup>31</sup> Based on them we will analyze the “deportation of the Chinese” from the viewpoints of its direct executors and eyewitnesses registered in the proceedings of the initial inquiry ordered by the War Governor and from the accounts of those responsible for this deportation. These reports and notifications enable us not only to precisely determine the scope of the tragedy, but also to reveal the role of the local authorities in developing the official version of the events.

### **“The Situation of the City was Desperate”**

To present the atmosphere in the city just before and after the beginning of the bombardment more adequately we will refer to the memoirs written by K. Nikitina. “Mobilization moved and stimulated the undisturbed peace and quiet of the city like a stone thrown right into motionless mud covered with mildew and slime.”<sup>32</sup> It visibly changed the attitude of local inhabitants towards Chinese migrants, ranging from confusion about what to do with hired workers and concern about the crops (“... right now I have three Manchurian servants! Surely I should not throw them away! How am I going to manage when in need?”) to ruthless attacks (“It serves you right, you enemy lice! Take that! And that! We are shedding blood for you!”).

Coming under Chinese fire started terrible panic:

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<sup>29</sup> V.I. Dyatlov, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>30</sup> RGIADV (f. 702. op. 1. d. 347).

<sup>31</sup> RGIADV (f. 704. op. 1. d. 897).

<sup>32</sup> K. Nikitina, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

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Unbelievable scenes took place in the streets. People were fleeing the city shouting, crying and cursing. One could hear moaning in the air—a mixture of people’s cries and sounds of bullets whizzing over their heads. An unbroken line of overcrowded carriages was moving along the street ... People talking and shouting, neighing horses, piercing creaks of a well, the rumble of artillery fire, the clatter of guns—all that sounded like a deafening and cacophonous concert terrible to the unaccustomed ear. That was how the first day of the siege began, the day still remembered by some Blagoveshchensk residents as a sheer nightmare that happened in reality. The Chinese were expected to launch an attack at any moment. Everyone was running around, bustling about, praying and crying. Every minute out of nowhere came heralds with all sorts of contradicting news. One solemnly stated that troops from Sretensk had come to rescue the city, whereas another, speechless with fear, mumbled that the troops had never come and the Chinese were most probably about to cross the river and occupy the city, and yet another was trying to prove with all his might that the Chinese had already started their attack and were deterred. People listened to all of them eagerly, not knowing which one to believe, turning from joy and hope for rescue to total despair and the other way round.<sup>33</sup>

At the City Council crowds kept struggling for hastily distributed guns, insufficient for all in need, and were about to break into shops and rob them to arm themselves properly. The Governor was outside the city, in Aigun’, with the remaining troops. The Mayor suffered from an illness. The rest of the authorities “vanished,” they got confused in the overwhelming panic and chaos. The situation of the city was dramatic. Had the Chinese attacked at that time, they would have little trouble seizing the city.<sup>34</sup>

K. Nikitina devoted only one 23-line-long paragraph to mention the deportation and killings of the Chinese, and plundering their possessions. “The Blagoveshchensk authorities were the ones who especially stood out as regards the crossing of the Chinese city residents to the enemy bank of the river” she wrote. “Undoubtedly, when it comes to the Chinese residents’ river crossing the authorities a little exaggerated, perhaps even ‘overdid things.’”

A truly critical situation of the city served as a mitigating fact for taking such measures. At the beginning of the siege there were still three to four thousand Chinese residents in the city. They mostly remained in a specially established so-called Chinese district. It was there that the Big Fist leaflets were later found, ordering the local Chinese to set fire to the city to help their countrymen. Thus, the Chinese begun to be gathered. When they were ... the authorities faced a dilemma! What were they supposed to do with these people? Keep them under guard? There was no one free to do that!

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 215, 216-217.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 216.

Leave them in the city unattended? Out of the question! After all, these peaceful Chinese had been found in possession of gunpowder, weapons and slipknots! There was only one solution: to get them across the river! The Chinese were shepherded to the bank and ordered to swim across the river, since there were no boats available. And they obeyed the command. Their countrymen opened fire on them from Sakhalyan. They drowned ... by the hundreds ... .<sup>35</sup>

Unfortunately, we have no data concerning neither the author of the memoirs, nor the exact time of their writing. They were published 10 years following the Blagoveshchensk siege (and apparently written shortly before this date), but nevertheless, managed to convey the atmosphere of the panic very vividly.

### **“In Fact, Matters Stood as Follows...”**

Already on July 4, the first day of “the expulsion of the Chinese,” Police Officer Shabanov of the 2nd police precinct who was in charge of the operation submitted his report to the Blagoveshchensk Chief of Police Batarevich who in turn sent it to the Province War Governor’s Office:

Having taken over ca. 1300 of the Chinese from Officer Levin, with the help of two Cossacks, policeman Moskalev and several volunteers I took them to the village of Verkhne-Blagoveshchensk. Although having climbed the mountain the Chinese refused to proceed any further, I forced them to obey my commands. Thus, we went through the mountains, remaining unnoticed by the Chinese from the opposite river bank, and descended towards the Amur above the village of Verkhne-Blagoveshchensk where the Chinese began to swim across the river, since they had no other means to cross it. The distance did not exceed 60 fm, and the majority of the Chinese refused to cross the river despite the fierce measures being taken. Therefore, the Cossacks of Verkhne-Blagoveshchensk fired a few shots. I suppose there must have been victims, some of the Chinese drowned, but the majority managed to swim across the river to join their countrymen.<sup>36</sup>

It is quite obvious that the “V.” author must have been familiar with the above document, after all he quoted its final part:

The organizers of the bloody river crossings made no effort to hide their actions. Police Officer Sh. reported the first crossing to his superiors on the same day, i.e. July 4. In his report he naively “supposes that there must have

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>36</sup> RGIADV (f. 704. op. 1. d. 897. l. 1.)

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been human victims: some of the Chinese drowned, but the majority (?) managed to swim across the river to join their countrymen.”<sup>37</sup>

In fact, it was quite on the contrary, one can assume that Shabanov was trying to conceal the whole truth about the events in question. That must have been the reason for the brevity and lack of precision evident in his report, especially when it comes to the number of victims. But he was by no means that “naïve”: he could not be unaware of the real consequences of the “river crossing.” Nonetheless, he failed to mention them in his report since he was afraid of being held responsible for what had happened.

The number of people in the first group of the Chinese—“ca. 1300”—was confirmed in the report of July 6, 1900 written by the Advisor for the Army Board of the Amur Cossack troops Yesaul Reiman and submitted to the commander of the Amur Province army. Ordered by K.N. Gribskii he conducted the first inquiry “hot on the heels of the involved” and questioned the witnesses. Below we will fully quote this “investigation on the river crossing by the Chinese expelled from the city.”

During the interview the village ataman and other Cossack witnesses of the village of Verkhne-Blagoveshchensk testified as follows:

Cossack Kosyrev, the village ataman, having received the order from the Army Board to deport the Chinese amounting to over 1000 and brought by the Officer from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Precinct of the Blagoveshchensk City Police to the Chinese side of the border, lead them under the convoy of temporary reserve Cossacks to the sandbank opposite the stanitsa and proposed that they swam across the river to join their countrymen, since there were no other means of transport available. The Chinese initially objected to it and many of them attempted to flee. Then the ataman took stricter measures and the Chinese headed towards the water in groups of 10 or 20. Since the sandbank was considerably vast and the Chinese were ford-crossing for about 40 fm to start swimming only later, the subsequent groups followed the first ones more confidently and little by little they all began to swim across the river; some having disposed of their clothes back at the river bank, others using them to form structures resembling bubbles<sup>38</sup> that helped them get to the other bank. Many, however, were trying to swim across the river completely dressed and almost all of them drowned. All in all no more than 300 people managed to get to the other side of the river.

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<sup>37</sup> V., *Blagoveshchenskaya “Utopiya,”* p. 235.

<sup>38</sup> O.A. Timofeev referring to the “bubbles” made of clothing noticed that “Ataman Pisarev created a fantastic picture.” And why exactly should it be impossible? Soldiers know for a fact that a blouse filled with river grass can serve as a perfect swimming equipment that allows to float on the water easily. Apparently, Chinese clothes made of thick cloth might, for example, have served such a purpose.

The witnesses, Cossacks Vladimir Shul'gin and Constable Kostromin as well as Cossacks Kosyrev, Semenov, Mungalov and others testified that on July 4, appointed by the village ataman, they convoyed the Chinese brought from the city to the bank and had them cross the river. They lead them towards the sandbank opposite the stanitsa and ordered to swim across the Amur. The Chinese refused at first and some even attempted to flee, but they forced them into the water. The deported forded the river for about 50 fm and then started swimming; many of them drowned. No more than 100-200 members of the whole group managed to reach the other side of the river.<sup>39</sup>

The constable was not responsible for what had happened and had no reason for concealing the truth from the Governor. Another thing is, however, the truthfulness of the testimonies given by the witnesses he interrogated. In a few days from the events, on July 10, the first "interrogation" report "was sent to the District Attorney for the Blagoveshchensk District Court for investigation purposes ..."<sup>40</sup>

The Blagoveshchensk authorities did not inform Khabarovsk about the event immediately, which was later imputed to the War Governor of the province K.N. Gribskii. In his wire of July 20, 1900 the Priamur'e Governor-General N.I. Grodekov demanded an explanation:

It is widely rumored that we have allegedly committed a mass murder of all the peaceful and unarmed Chinese inhabiting the city. Would you kindly telegraph a truthful answer if there were any grounds for the above-mentioned and an explanation of what is happening to the Blagoveshchensk Chinese?<sup>41</sup>

Since then correspondence continued between the War Governor's Office and the Blagoveshchensk Chief of Police on the one hand, and The Priamur'e Governor-General's Office on the other.

Judging from K.N. Gribskii's reply (of July 27, sent to Khabarovsk), N.I. Grodekov's wire reached him during the battle of Kolushan and he ordered to send it to the Deputy Governor S.N. Taksin. As it turned out, the wire had not been delivered to Blagoveshchensk immediately, therefore the answer came later than expected. According to the Governor, what happened was:

In fact, the things stand as follows: I have been informed that on July 4 when 800 Chinese nationals who wished to leave the city attempted at crossing the Amur near Verkhne-Blagoveshchensk to reach the right river bank, some of them drowned."

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<sup>39</sup> RGIADV (f. 704. op. 1. d. 897. l. 2-3.)

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., l. 11.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., l. 4.

Simultaneously, the Governor informed that

... on July 5 I ordered to conduct an inquiry, which was reported on to him on July 9 and handed over to the District Attorney on July 10 to initiate an official investigation that still remained in progress. Independently, on July 9 and 15 I announced that the city, zemstvo, and Cossack police had taken most vigorous and urgent measures to protect peaceful Chinese residents of the province and their possessions. There are currently up to 150 Chinese nationals under police protection in the city, who constitute a special group of diggers that starting from tomorrow will work on building fortifications in Sakhalyan and later in Aigun'. Apart from that there are peaceful Chinese nationals living in villages who still are in trade and work in the fields. I will inform you about the results of the investigation and I am sending my announcements by mail.<sup>42</sup>

### **“... to Have Them Explain the Situation Instead of Speaking in Riddles”**

N.I. Grodekov was not satisfied with this reply. His office informed that “the military commander demanded to be wired to have them explain the situation instead of speaking in riddles.”<sup>43</sup> A more detailed and sincere reply was required. K.N. Gribskii himself must have been inadequately informed about what had happened, since he was preoccupied with military activities in Manchuria. A detailed account of the events was included in the report of July 29 written by the Blagoveshchensk Chief of Police Batarevich for the Deputy Governor of the Amur Province S.N. Taksin. We will fully quote this text, since it formed the basis for the information sent by the Province authorities first to Khabarovsk (the report wired by the Deputy Governor on July 30, often referred to by researchers) and later to the superior central national authorities.

Following direct orders from Your Excellency I am honored to inform that I can offer the following explanation as regards the Amur crossing by a group of Chinese nationals: I was ordered to gather all the Chinese in the city and deport them to the other side of the Amur. In order to do so, I were to bring them to the river bank and suggest that they asked their countrymen to provide them with boats. Since there were up to one thousand and a half of the Chinese gathered there, i.e. we would require a large convoy to surround them that would come under fire because the bombardment

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<sup>42</sup> RGIADV, f. 704. op. 1. d. 897. l. 5.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., l. 5-6.

was still continuing, I decided to bring the Chinese to the Zeya crossing to transport them to the Zeya-area (Zazeiskii) Precinct, having suggested that they asked their countrymen for boats and headed for Sakhalyan. The War Governor, however, did not support my decision and the command was to bring the Chinese to Verkhne-Blagoveshchensk, which was carried out under the supervision of Police Officer Shabanov. The latter was supposed to ask for boats and cooperation from the village ataman. I additionally informed Colonel Volkovskii who commanded the Cossacks, about the situation and—as far as I know—he ordered the village ataman to be of any help during the river crossing by the Chinese.

From the report written by Officer Shabanov it is evident that having arrived at Verkhne-Blagoveshchensk he turned for help to the village ataman and was refused, since the latter feared that the enemy could use the boats for their purposes. That was when the Chinese were forced to swim across the river. The angry Cossacks of Verkhne-Blagoveshchensk fired shots at the swimming Chinese. The number of killed and injured remains unknown. The village ataman and the officer requested and urged them to cease fire.

Considering the above, I asked for convoys to be sent along with officers for the next two crossings. These officers reported that the crossings proceeded safely, although there are individual accounts of shots fired, as they say, by the Chinese from the opposite river bank.

These are all the details I am able to report.<sup>44</sup>

The information sent by Deputy Governor Taksin to Khabarovsk supplemented the report written by the Chief of Police with the account that there were “over two thousand Chinese residents” in Blagoveshchensk before the bombardment and arguments to support the decision about their necessary deportation: “In view of the hostile feeling among city residents running high against the Chinese who were suspected of intending to set fire to the city, there were multiple requests to get rid of the latter.” The Deputy Governor also informed about the “inquiry” conducted at the Governor’s request that “is supposed to end shortly” and about the situation of the Chinese remaining in the city, some of them “directly under police guard” and others “guaranteed to behave well by individual city residents.”<sup>45</sup>

### **“To Request the Chief of Police to Answer”**

When the news about “The Blagoveshchensk ‘Utopia’” reached the capital the Priamur’e Governor-General received a wire from the Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Sakharov:

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., l. 7-8.

<sup>45</sup> RGIADV, f. 702. op. 1. d. 347. l. 11-12.



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Would you kindly reply, if the information given by the *Amurskii krai* article about masses of unfortunate victims in Blagoveshchensk that were gathered and later killed is reliable. It is necessary to control pieces of information sent to the capital newspapers, not to mention the ones published locally.<sup>46</sup>

The reply included a copy of the report written by Deputy Governor Taksin on July 30, with certain encrypted words, i.e. “swim across,” “objected to,” “forced,” “many of them drowned,” *etc.* Because of the critic “from above” regarding censorship Taksin’s report was supplemented with a note: “Orders were given on measures to be taken against publishing unreliable information.”<sup>47</sup>

The more widespread the news of the Blagoveshchensk events became in high-ranking institutions, the more concrete questions the superiors asked. Therefore, Lieutenant General N.I. Grodekov, aware of the inevitability of his reporting to Saint Petersburg, asked K.N. Gribskii in his wire of August 29, 1900 to inform him “additionally, under whose supervision and responsibility the first group of the Chinese was deported from Blagoveshchensk, what the exact orders regarding the way and course of the Amur crossing were, what measures were taken by the administration to prevent the death of the aforesaid Chinese,” and “how the remaining two groups of Chinese nationals reached the right bank of the river.”<sup>48</sup> To answer the Governor-General’s questions K.N. Gribskii who lacked the necessary information, came up with a resolution “To request the Chief of Police to answer.”

On September 7 the Blagoveshchensk Chief of Police submitted a new, more detailed report:

... carrying out the oral order issued by His Excellency the Governor I gathered the Chinese inhabiting the city during the bombardment to deport them to the other side of the river. Offering them boats for the river crossing meant leaving all means of transport in their hands and practically disposing of them. With this in view I decided to proceed with the deportation through the Zeya River, and to suggest the Chinese to find the means of transport on their own, since my assignment was to get them out of the city and there was no place they could stay while posing a danger of setting the city on fire and at the same time being exposed to a danger of attacks by angry city residents. The idea of crossing the Zeya was dismissed by His Excellency the Governor. It was decided to send the Chinese to the village of Verkhne-Blagoveshchensk where, according to the information that had been gathered, there were boats available. Thus, a group of Chinese

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 20.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 21.

<sup>48</sup> RGIADV, f. 704. op. 1. d. 897. l. 12.

nationals was sent to Verkhne-Blagoveshchensk under the supervision of Police Officer Shabanov, accompanied by two peon Cossacks appointed until July 4, two volunteers: Laveiko and Regishchevskii and 80 recruits. To prevent the Cossacks from shooting at the Chinese I contacted the Army Board Chairman Colonel Volkovskii. Shabanov, having taken over the Chinese from Officer Levin, lead them through the mountains to Verkhne-Blagoveshchensk. Having reached Cossack camps and realized that there was nothing further but thicket Shabanov let the group go first and went to the camp where the sergeant assigned 6 Cossacks to his force. Shabanov warned the sergeant that the Chinese could not be shot at and ordered his Cossacks to join the group. He followed them having sent one peon Cossack to the settlement to inform the ataman about the need to get the means of transport ready. In Verkhne-Blagoveshchensk Shabanov turned to the ataman to ask him for a scow moored at the river bank that could hold up to 500 [people] and some boats, but the ataman objected to making them available and explained that none of the Cossacks would transport the Chinese. And when Shabanov told the ataman that the Chinese could cross the river by themselves, without any help from the Cossacks, the latter categorically refused to offer any means of transport. At the same time one and a half versts further from Verkhne-Blagoveshchensk the Cossacks willfully shepherded the Chinese to the river bank and opened fire on them. Shabanov and the ataman rushed towards the river bank and ordered them, in the presence of the volunteers, i.e. Laveiko and Regishchevskii, to hold their fire, but they disobeyed the command and continued shooting. The gunfire lasted over half an hour. The Chinese who survived, frightened with the shooting, started swimming across the Amur hoping to reach its right bank. It was too late and virtually impossible to stop them.

As regards the second and third groups of the Chinese, however, they were brought to the river convoyed by an officer accompanied by recruits and policemen. They were not given any means of transport either, thus only a very small number of them managed to swim across the river. During the deportation of the two latter groups I also asked for Colonel Volkovskii's cooperation.<sup>49</sup>

In this case the Chief of Police was trying to explain why the Chinese could not remain in the city and pointed out that the necessary means of transport were available at the stanitsa (contrarily to the testimonies by Shabanov or the village ataman). He specifically emphasized the fact that he repeatedly asked for cooperation from the Amur Cossack Army Board Chairman, Colonel Volkovskii, warning the latter about the inadmissibility of any shots fired by Cossacks, thus, he was indirectly trying to justify himself.

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 15-16.

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He did not, however answer all the questions asked by the Governor-General. That was why on September 9 the Province Office once again requested for an urgent explanation concerning the instructions given to Officer Shabanov as regarded the method and course of the river crossing by the first group of Chinese nationals and the way the subsequent crossings were carried out.<sup>50</sup> The Chief of Police replied the following in his report of September 11:

1) Shabanov was never given any particular instructions concerning the river crossing of the Chinese. He was only told to turn to the village ataman who had the means of transport at his disposal; 2) The second group of the Chinese was convoyed by Captain Rybin, and the third one by Lieutenant Antonov. The officers were appointed by the War Commander following my motion based on the War Governor's command; they were also instructed to address the village ataman to get boats, since there were enough of them in Verkhne-Blagoveshchensk and one could not expect that the ataman would ever disobey orders from officers; 3) The means of transport for a river crossing could not be delivered to Verkhne-Blagoveshchensk since the Amur was under fire and there was no one available to be hired for transporting them by road; there were no horses either. Part of the inhabitants were in . . . [I could not figure out the word here—T.S.]<sup>51</sup> and some left the city. Besides, everyone had such a negative attitude towards the Chinese that getting any help was practically out of the question; 4) To avoid any cases of death amongst the Chinese each time, shortly before the deportation and on its day, Colonel Volkovinskii was telephoned or (once) asked in writing to order the village ataman cooperate during river crossings.<sup>52</sup>

Nevertheless, Volkovinskii denied all the above in his report of September 21, 1900, submitted to the Governor:

I have not received any instructions concerning river crossings by the Chinese at Verkhne-Blagoveshchensk. On July 5 I was only informed by the Blagoveshchensk Chief of Police about the second crossing. It was already late, about 2 pm, and the crossing was about to finish. I found out about other river crossings from the outsiders and I still do not know exactly how many of them there actually were. I was never telephoned to get such information, except for one case, on July 4 at about 10 am. The person who rang was one of the officers, not the Chief of Police.

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 17.

<sup>51</sup> Most probably “in the city.” According to other sources and common sense we can figure out that some residents must have been on the river bank, others outside the city, i.e. rushing to leave the city during the bombardment.

<sup>52</sup> RGIADV, f. 704. op. 1. d. 897. l. 19.

What was more, Volkovinskii did not confirm the information about numerous means of transport at the Cossack stanitsa.

There were no boats in Verkhne-Blagoveshchensk, but a few that could hold 20 people, and when boats had once been demanded for a river crossing of 150 hunters, to deliver the necessary number Cossacks needed to be sent for them as far as to the right bank of the Amur and Ignat'evka.<sup>53</sup>

The reports written by Batarevich and Volkovinskii noticeably contradict one another. Apparently, each official aimed at shifting responsibility onto someone else.

We have fully quoted these thorough documents highly consciously. Case No. 897 from the Amur Province War Governor's Office "On the river crossing of the Chinese to the right Amur bank" has long remained virtually unmentioned by researchers as a source regarding the issue. We would not wish to give "selected" quotations to prove any thesis. Most importantly, the completeness and the right sequence of presented material enable us to follow the very process of forming the official version of the events in question.

### **"... God Knows How Many of Them Swam Across the River and How Many Drowned."**

The material referred to and quoted above allows to claim that the literature of the subject (both pre-revolutionary and contemporary) includes incorrect notions about the choice of place for the river crossing and that the number of victims is often exaggerated.

While reading certain works one could have an impression that the place for the crossing was chosen almost especially to get as many of the Chinese as possible drowned. For instance, the author of "The Blagoveshchensk 'Utopia'" maintained that "the width of the river exceeded a hundred fathoms and its depth came to over two fathoms. There is also a very strong current there."<sup>54</sup> But judging from the documents the village of Verkhne-Blagoveshchensk was selected precisely because it was near the narrowest and considerably most shallow part of the river ("the sandbank opposite the stanitsa," "the distance of no more than 60 fm," out of which "forty could be forded," "they were still fording 50 fm farther"). The place was obviously chosen to enable the Chinese to cross the river and not to make them drown. By the way, later,

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., l. 25.

<sup>54</sup> V., *Blagoveshchenskaya "Utopiya,"* p. 233. That is the width of over 200 m and the depth of over 4 m (1 fm = 2,13 m).

when the storm of the right bank began, the same place was selected as the most convenient for the crossing of Russian troops.<sup>55</sup>

As a rule considerable differences in assessing the number of victims depend on the sources employed by different authors. The most common references include either the imprecise “several thousand” or from 3 to 5-6 thousand. The information provided by officials for the case “On the river crossing of the Chinese ...” allows to take into account a much smaller numbers. Officer Shabanov testified that he took over “ca. 1300 people,” the village ataman mentioned “over 1000,” the Chief of Police “no more than one thousand and a half,” and the Governor “800.” The wire sent by Deputy Governor Taksin gave the number of over two thousand, but it concerned the Chinese living in Blagoveshchensk shortly before the bombardment.

The case does not include any testimonies producing the number of victims of the subsequent river crossings. The official review of the Russian Military Agency shows that

... on the same day, i.e. July 4, another group of Chinese nationals amounting to no more than 84 was deported, out of which also hardly anyone survived the river crossing. On July 6 and 8 two other groups of the Chinese followed, consisting of 170 and 66 people; out of the first one only 20 people managed to swim across the river and the second proved more successful—the majority of its members reached the opposite bank of the Amur.<sup>56</sup>

These numbers were also referred to by the author of “The Blagoveshchensk ‘Utopia.’”<sup>57</sup> If we add the maximum number of people in the first group (“no more than one thousand and a half”) to the number of members of all the subsequent ones, and assume that no one managed to survive, it would give us ca. two thousand people.

Naturally, we take into consideration only these who drowned or were killed on the way to the river crossing. Such facts can also be found in the sources. For example, on April 13 the War Governor testified to the District Attorney of the Priamur’e War District Court:

On the way the Chinese followed from Blagoveshchensk to the village of Verkhne-Blagoveshchensk where they crossed the river some traces of violent actions against them were discovered: their clothes, bones and even corpses.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> A. Timofeev, *op. cit.*

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in I.M. Popov, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

<sup>57</sup> V., *Blagoveshchenskaya ‘Utopiya,’* p. 234.

<sup>58</sup> RGIADV, f. 704. op. 1. d. 897. l. 36.

It is necessary to treat any concrete numbers with carefulness, since the sources at our disposal have so far not allowed for determining the exact number of victims of the Blagoveshchensk tragedy. As they say, fear makes people exaggerate. Perhaps that proved true at the time of “the Blagoveshchensk panic” and made people not only employ horrifying methods for deportation, but also produce imprecise accounts of the range of the tragedy given initially by the contemporaries and then by researchers. As the Chairman of the “Amur Steamshipping Society” N. Makeev wrote in a local newspaper, “God knows how many of them swam across the river and how many drowned.”<sup>59</sup>

### **“... As Regards the River Crossing by the Chinese I Can Explain the Following”**

All the correspondence included in the case “On the river crossing of the Chinese to the right Amur bank” proves that forming an official point of view on the events that took place was directly dependent on the requirements of the superior authorities. One can single out three major milestones in the development of the version employed by the province authorities—the ones “for our own purposes,” for Khabarovsk, and for Saint Petersburg. It is quite evident that it proved impossible to make do with Yesaul Reiman’s “testimony.” Perhaps the province authorities would be happy not to “wash their dirty linen in public,” but the corpses floating on the Amur were impossible to hide. Each report contributed to the shape of the official opinion, and each new piece of information repeated the previous one and simultaneously brought in additional details or explanations. Phrases such as “I suppose there were victims” or “the majority managed to swim across the river” changed into “almost everyone drowned,” “many of them drowned” or “the number of killed and injured remains unknown.” “Strict measures” were initially modified to “several shots fired” to finally transform into “volleys of shots” and “a shooting” initiated by “angry Cossacks.” Together with the information on the lack of “means of transport in the stanitsa” appeared accounts of numerous boats at the river bank and “a scow moored at the river bank that could hold up to 500 [people],” *etc.* At the same time the authorities never forgot writing about “taking measures” and the reports were invariably complemented with arguments for the necessity to expel the Chinese from the city.

Thus, the official point of view consists of three major elements: 1) arguments for the necessity of deportation; 2) descriptions of deportation

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<sup>59</sup> *Amurskii krai*, July 30, (August 12), 1900.

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methods with explanations of what had happened; and 3) accounts of measures taken regarding the inquiry of the events and halting and preventing attacks on the peaceful Chinese.

The arguments in favor of deportation:

In view of the hostile feeling among city residents running high against the Chinese who were suspected of intending to set fire to the city, there were multiple requests to get rid of the latter.

Or

... my assignment was to get them out of the city and there was no place they could stay posing a danger of setting the city on fire and exposed to a danger of attacks by angry city residents.

The method of deportation (“swimming across the river”) was explained with the inadequate behavior of the village of Verkhne-Blagoveshchensk residents and their ataman, who refused to give the means of transport for the crossing. Descriptions of the very river crossings in turn remained laconic and very far from the detailed “accounts of eyewitnesses.” It seemed apparent that the province authorities were trying to shift responsibility onto others, including the executors of their orders, whereas the latter were making attempts to blame each other and the village residents. The higher the authorities inquiring the province decision-makers, the more concrete questions were asked and the more evident the striving for justification and shifting responsibility onto someone else seemed to be.

The “inquiry” conducted at Governor’s request can be included in the range of measures taken by the province administration. It was sent to the District Attorney “in order to conduct a formal investigation.” All kinds of binding resolutions, orders and announcements made by the War Governor, the “Head of Internal Defense” and also the Blagoveshchensk Chief of Police regarding “the protection of peaceful Chinese residents of the province and their possessions” were issued. Apparently, any information from the province authorities concerning the measures that were taken can also be viewed as an urge to justify themselves before higher authorities and a proof that they were able to operate actively.

Thus, the official version of the province authorities seems closest to the thesis that “war is war.” There is no chance here of admitting to their feeling of panic or performing actions driven by fear. And it seems quite contrary to opinions expressed by the city residents. K. Nikitina:

The Governor was outside the city ... The Mayor suffered from an illness. The rest of the authorities “vanished,” they got confused in the overwhelming panic and chaos.

N. Makeev:

I am talking about the drowning of peaceful Chinese workers and traders—I put it down to the panic amongst the city authorities.<sup>60</sup>

To conclude—“a rejoinder in a dispute” about viewing the above-described events as genocide. It is doubtful that there was a clear intention of the authorities to liquidate the Chinese living in the province as a group. Soon after the military activity had stopped the Chinese started coming back slowly. All the more so because the province suffered from a serious manpower shortage. In September a local paper journalist wrote:

And now each returning Chinese receives a warm welcome from our peasants. They are trying hard to convince and attract them to prevent them from working for others. Especially women spare no effort and almost fight for every “Van’ka.”<sup>61</sup>

And a few years later, especially following the “unfortunate war” with Japan, the flow of Chinese migrants increased to such an extent that the Priamur’s authorities began to notice the necessity of its limitation. All the above hardly goes hand in hand with the notion of genocide.

As the contemporaries aptly pointed out, there was an outburst of panic or “panic fear” in Blagoveshchensk, which—according to V. Dal’—appeared to be “sudden, irrational, senseless, unreasonable, and overpowering.” The panic that also paralyzed the authorities led to a terrifying tragedy. The role of the local authorities in these events was not so much about conducting “criminal activities” as about criminal *inactivity* at the most critical point. Regardless of all the reports on the measures taken, they were unable to prevent the mass deaths of peaceful Chinese residents.

*Tatyana Sorokina*

### **“The Blagoveshchensk Panic” of the Year 1900: the Version of the Authorities**

#### **A b s t r a c t**

The article considers an incident which took place in the early July in 1900 in the Amur region and which tragically culminated in the deportation of the Chinese subjects living in Blagoveshchensk and its surroundings, known as “Blagoveshchensk ‘Utopia.’” It is shown how these events appear in the testimony of direct executors and witnesses of the incident recorded in the first inquest that was conducted by the order of the military governor, as well as in the presentation of the persons responsible for the expulsion of the Chinese from the city. All these documents drawn up in the wake of the events let us clarify the scope of the tragedy and significantly expand the understanding of the role of local authorities and of forming of the official version of what happened.

**Key words:** “Blagoveshchensk ‘Utopia,’” Chinese migrants, deportation.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> *Amurskii krai*, September 6 (19), 1900.