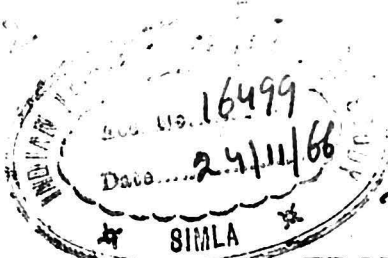


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A RUSSIAN EXODUS FROM SINKIANG

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ON July 17, 1951, there arrived at the Indian frontier with Tibet, at the Jelep-la, between the Chumbi valley and Sikkim, a party of Russian refugees who had fled from strife-torn Sinkiang, over the Tibetan plateau, to the comparative safety of the Indian sub-continent. It consisted of twenty-one Old Believers plus two Siberian Greek Orthodox, there being two women among the former, a mother and daughter, the latter aged only thirteen years. They had had a gruelling four years' journey, during which the greater number of those who had set out originally from their home in the Altai mountains had perished. They had been preceded along the same route earlier this year, firstly by the Californian student Frank Bessac with a Russian companion; then by the Torgut Prince Min-Wong, his two wives (one Mongol and the other Polish) and a few personal retainers; and finally by the Kuomintang Vice-Governor of Sinkiang at Hami, Yolbars Beg.

The weary, although still sturdy-looking, little band, dressed in American surplus army clothes and broad-rimmed British army hats acquired in Lhasa in exchange for their arms, which they had disposed of there, but still in the characteristic high Russian boots, were brought into Kalimpong in West Bengal from the road-head to the north at Algarah in two civilian trucks generously put at their disposal by some local traders, and accompanied by officers of the Indian Frontier Police. Tea was prepared for them on their arrival at the Tibetan restaurant of Kalimpong, expenses being borne by its kind-hearted owner, Mrs. Gompu, and it was while they were partaking of this thoughtfully offered refreshment that I was able to interview them and get their story from them first-hand.

As this story throws a most interesting light on the recent events that disrupted the previously existing order in Central Asia, it is well worth being made more widely known, it seems to me, to those who have a special interest in this remote part of the world, from which very little news has recently come out.

The Old Believers, I am told, were part of those settlers in the Altai mountains, on the Chinese side, who moved there many hundreds of years ago, when they were persecuted for their religious convictions by the established Greek Orthodox Church under the Empress Catherine the Great. The families of those whose remnants have now arrived in India had, however, been there only since 1912. They were farmers and cattle breeders, bee-keepers and horse dealers, who possessed small holdings of private land at Shing-Kure, near Shar-sume (Tulta) in north-western Sinkiang. The two Siberians—an old N.C.O. of the Tsarist army, and a younger man—were both from Omsk, the former having fled to the Altai in 1927 after his property in Russia had been forcefully collectivized.

Migration to India had taken place in two stages. First when they had been forced away from their homes to another part of Sinkiang by interior disturbances in the province; and next, when they had had to leave again, this time for abroad, by the arrival of the Communist Chinese. Asked why they had not stayed, as people of their social condition had not much to fear from a Communist régime, they answered that they had no desire to be "regimented," and wanted to retain as they had always done the freedom of their religious convictions. They preferred the risk of "dying in the steppe," they said, to being compelled to partake of a social order in which they would never, they felt sure, be able to fit.

The first act of the tragedy occurred on October 7, 1947, Old Style (that is, in accordance with the Julian calendar, or fourteen days later than the same date of the Gregorian calendar), when their village was shelled by a combination of Kazak rebels and of Soviet troops arriving from Kulja. Word went round that these insurgents and their supporters, who were attempting to set up an autonomous, Soviet-orientated republic in Sinkiang, were going to sack the town, butcher all the men, but spare the women and children. All the male population of Shing-Kure then banded together under a leader called Josif Samuelov and set out to fight the intruders with whatever means they had. Samuelov told them they would probably be back within five days!

They were accompanied by only two women, the wife and daughter of one of their number, who had firmly refused, unlike the families of the others, to be left behind. They were naturally no match for their opponents, were defeated, and the 111 survivors trekked away south-east towards the sources of the Kara Irtysh river. From there they went on to the Bala Irtysh and the Ku Irtysh, finally reaching Sartagaï, where, completely famished, they slaughtered most of their horses and ate them.

They went on to the Baitik Bogdo mountains, on the border of Outer Mongolia, where they were shot at by guards from the other side of the frontier and lost five more horses of those that still remained. A K.M.T. garrison, stationed on the Sinkiang side, however, received them well. They gave them food, clothes, boots and supplies, and despatched them twenty days later to the south, to Ku-chen (Tsonji), where they settled in their old agricultural pursuits for two whole years. Those who had left their families behind could get no news of these, and it was presumed that they had been lost in the upheaval. Some of them wanted to return home, but Samuelov kept them from doing so, assuring them that soon they would be able to return, and must do so all together.

Then came the great exodus. During the summer of 1949 the K.M.T. troops of the area surrendered to the advancing Chinese Communists. Without waiting for the latter to arrive, the remaining Old Believers immediately set out for Fu-yüan (Jabser). Here they met the American Vice-Consul in Urumchi, Douglas S. Mackieran, who with Frank Bessac, a Fulbright student from Lodi, California, had preferred to attempt reaching India through Tibet than over the Karakorum as Mr. Hall Paxton, the Consul-General, had done, following the closing of the U.S.A. Consulate-General in Tihwa on September 27, 1949. Mackieran and Bessac took two

of the Russians with them and left at once for Tibet. They were to get stranded in a small village after savage winter storms blocked the mountain passes ahead of them, and when they eventually started off again in the spring Mackieran and one of the Russians were shot dead on April 13, 1950, by Tibetan frontier guards, who mistook them for Kazak raiders; F. Bessac and the surviving Russian alone reached India.

The 109 remaining Russians themselves left, soon after Mackieran had departed, for Barkul, which was considered safer. They stayed there some time to replenish their stores, and one of them was killed—by what they believe to have been Chinese bandits—when a party of them went on a food-seeking foray at Santai, to the north. At Barkul they found the Kazak leader Osman Bator (see the late Ian Morrison's article "Some Notes on the Kazaks of Sinkiang" in the *ROYAL CENTRAL ASIAN JOURNAL* of January, 1949, Vol. XXXVI, Part I, p. 67) encamped here with about 5,000 of his followers. The Kazaks invited the Russians to stay with them, which they agreed to do. On February 14, O.S., the camp was moved to the Pei-shan, where winter quarters were taken up. Twelve Russians elected to remain behind at Barkul, so that there were only ninety-six of them who went on to the new camp.

At the end of March, 1950, Yolbars Beg, K.M.T. Vice-Governor of Sinkiang, with his seat at Hami, himself a Uighur-Turki and not a Chinese, arrived in the Pei-shan camp with ten followers. He proposed to Osman Bator that they should all go south, as he feared, he said, a Chinese Communist attack if they remained where they were. Osman refused, however, giving as reason that he had many ewes who were about to lamb and that he wanted to wait for this to happen first. Yolbars did not wish to leave alone and so reluctantly agreed to wait in the camp. As he was short of food—he could get but very little from Osman Bator—he sent twenty of the Russians out on a new foray, which they successfully managed for him.

Soon after, 1,600 defeated Tungan troops also arrived in the Pei-shan and declared their allegiance to Yolbars. Encouraged by this, the Vice-Governor decided to make an attempt to recapture Hami, and set out with these troops to do so. There was a battle at a place called Bagdash (?) and Yolbars was defeated by the Chinese Communists. He came hurrying back to Osman Bator's camp.

Unfortunately, he was followed. Chinese Communist troops now attacked the camp, and everybody who was in it split up into three parties: Yolbars, some followers, his Chinese wife and the Russian family who were by now looking after her; Osman, his Kazaks and some of the Russians, including J. Samuelov; the remaining Russians, numbering about twenty. Confusion followed. There were skirmishes and fighting, in which they could not quite make out, they say, whom they were fighting. They were completely cut off from Osman Bator, and so went off towards where Yolbars was. They joined him all right, but were attacked and cut off from him too. Giving up hope of rejoining him, they moved off on their own to Turkul Dawan and Umer-tau, where they stopped in comparative safety to rest for about a month.

It was here that, in view of the desperate nature of their circumstances they decided to give up the struggle and to take refuge in Tibet. There was very good grass for the horses at this spot, which enabled the latter to recuperate. A short time afterwards Yolbars and his party joined up with them, having ascaped from their pursuers.

A month later they started off. They entered Kansu province at Argalante (?). Here, to their surprise, Osman Bator caught up with them. The Russians who had been with him were, however, no longer so, and he was quite unable to say what had happened to them in the fighting.

All of them now moved off farther south. They went to Sulusum-tagh, and after having crossed a desert, where they suffered privations and many of the Kazak women and children died, they arrived at Kara-gurun. From this place they intended going west, but ran into Chinese Communist troops on the march and turned quickly back towards the east. They encamped in what they thought was a quiet spot to rest a day or two, but a Chinese Communist plane flew over them, spotting them. They moved on immediately, and that night saw Chinese Communist troops in trucks travelling from Sinkiang to Kansu on the highway which passed close to where they were. Happily they were not seen, so that, crossing the road, they made good their escape into the Tun-huang mountains.

They next passed Anhsi-chou on their way to Aste-su, where they unfortunately again encountered Chinese Communist troops, who immediately attacked them. They fought a running battle now, retreating towards Kurumshar (?) and travelling two days without water. The Communists followed them and attacked them again, so that they were forced to go on without halting to Karadavan (Hei-davan) and without being able, as they told me, "to eat their *kasha*." Here they spent the night, having beaten off the Chinese. In the morning the latter returned, however, and Osman Bator was cut off from them. The last they saw of him was that he was fleeing towards the east, with Chinese Communists in trucks equipped with machine guns hotly pursuing him. They were unable to say what happened to him eventually, and have not heard if he was killed or captured. They told me that they thought he might well be alive and still in hiding in the mountains. (From the Torgut Prince Min Wong I heard that Osman Bator had been captured and that the Communists had talked him into being flown to Peking for negotiations with the new Government, but that on arrival in the capital he had been carried out of the plane dead, having suffered heart failure on the journey, which took place at a very great altitude. Later, Prince Min Wong told me that he had received other information, and that Osman Bator had been rounded up and killed by the Communists together with his followers.)

The Russians were now without horses, having lost them all in the fighting. So they walked back to Kurumshar, got supplies there and trekked on to Sharagolji and Yen-chuen, where they heard that the Mongol chief Bovro was encamped. They, however, did not find him there, and so continued their march over the Ulan-davan pass to a place called Makhai (appr. 94° long. E. by 40° lat. N.). There they met a Mongol who volunteered to take a message from them to Bovro, who, he said, was in hiding.

Shortly after they had sent the message as suggested he came to see them in person. He had forty-eight followers with him, men, women and children, all Mongols.

A conference followed, in which it was decided that they would all go on to the Taijinar area—themselves, Yolbars and Bovro's party. This they did, arriving safely at their destination.

Here, however, they had a quarrel with Yolbars, who wanted to join another Kazak leader, called Hussein, at his camp at Gass in the Baga Sertang (desert). They refused to follow him, and he left them in a huff, taking the Russian family with him to look after his Chinese wife as usual.

They then travelled along the road to Sining with Bovro, on horses that they had succeeded in acquiring. They passed Tingelik, Nomkhon (Nomoro Kutum)—where they bought some food—and reached the Gorbun Neiji river, where they stopped to rest for eight days. They next branched off over the Neiji göl, where they were told by local inhabitants that many others had preceded them on the road to Tibet. They could not find out who these were, however.

All was plain sailing now to the Tibetan outpost at the Tang-la. They were able to live off game which they shot on the way. The Tibetans received them very well indeed. They went on to Nag-chu-ka without being delayed at all, where a very crestfallen Yolbars joined up with them again with his wife, the Russian family and only one camel left. It was here that they heard that Mackieran had been killed, although they did not get the details of how it happened.

While they were at Nag-chu-ka, Mrs. Yolbars died, and the Russian family who had been looking after her joined the other twenty Russians, thus bringing their numbers up to twenty-three. They set off after that with Bovro and his people for Dam, where the Tibetans directed that they should proceed. Yolbars beg left on his own for India, from here eventually making his way to Formosa with funds supplied to him by the K.M.T. agency in Delhi.

The Russians went to Dam over Radeng (Reting) gompa, and when they reached that place Bovro said he would go no farther. He received permission from the Tibetans to remain behind, and as far as is known is still in the vicinity, perhaps with the Mongol settlers of Nam Tso (Tengri Nor).

It was December by the time the Russian party reached Dam. They stayed there for about a month, and the Tibetan Government then ordered them on to Takse Dzong. A demand which they had made to enter Lhasa was refused. Instead, they were offered permanent residence in Tibet provided they split up into parties of two, each of these to be assigned to a dzong; they would be given women to live with if they accepted, they were told.

The offer was naturally refused, none of them agreeing to be separated from the others. An understanding between Tibet and the Chinese Communist Governments was also in the offing, which made them apprehensive of their future. So, when they had been in the new place a little while, the Siberian ex-N.C.O. and one of the others, who had come to be looked

upon as a leader because of his resourcefulness and the smattering of Tibetan which he had picked up, escaped one night to Lhasa. They reached the capital successfully, and made their way to the Potala, where they insisted on seeing Si-lön Lu khang, the acting minister who was in charge of the administration in the absence of the Dalai Lama, the latter having already departed for Yatung in the Chumbi valley.

They had some difficulty in meeting this personage, and even more in convincing him that the others of the party be allowed to join them in Lhasa, but they eventually succeeded, and were all quartered in Se-shi lingka. They interviewed the head of the Indian Mission, Sri S. Sinha, with whom they were able to converse in Chinese. (For talks with the Tibetans, they made use of some of the Kazaks in Lhasa.) They applied for permission to proceed to India from the Indian Mission, but were advised to go on first to Gyantse, where they were told they could better obtain this through the Trade Mission.

The Tibetans did not object to their moving south, which they soon did. In Gyantse they met the Austrian Peter Aufschnaiter, and with his help they telegraphed to the International Refugee Organization in Geneva (Switzerland) to request assistance. Aufschnaiter also helped them fill out the forms necessary for their application to enter India. From Geneva they never received any answer. Things were difficult here, they told me, as they could not find any interpreters to help them.

Formalities thus completed, the party moved on to the Chumbi valley, and were quartered by the Tibetans in Sharsima. They stayed a month and ten days here, awaiting the answer from Delhi and, they hoped, permission to enter India. This they were now particularly eager to obtain, since negotiations between the Tibetans and the Chinese in Peking seemed about to be successfully concluded, and they feared that they would after all fall into the hands of the Communists.

The Sino-Tibetan treaty was signed, and shortly after permission came through to proceed to India, provided the Indian Government did not assist them in any way. They got ready to leave, and actually crossed the Jelep-la the very same day as the Chinese delegation to Lhasa, headed by General Chang Chin Wu, was travelling from Gangtok to Yatung by way of the Nathu-la.

From Kalimpong the Russian party, minus the family consisting of father, mother and daughter, who stayed behind, moved on to Calcutta, where they were all hospitably received by the West Bengal Government. Their stay in Kalimpong and their fares down to the plains were looked after by private charity, everybody in the bazar, from rich Marwaris to ordinary merchants, being exceptionally generous in their assistance—and this despite local Communist propaganda that the new arrivals were “Anglo-American agents who had sabotaged the Russian and Chinese people’s revolutions.” At the moment of writing the Russian Old Believers, refugees from the Altai, are in a camp at the Belvedere in Calcutta, on three months’ temporary visas, awaiting a decision as to what is to be their ultimate destination and future place of resettlement.

