Russians in Manchuria

By George C. Guins

Today, of all the Manchurian cities, Harbin is the only one still preserving its Russian appearance. This may be explained by the fact that one-half of the entire Russian population of Manchuria (54,000, according to the 1940 census) lives in Harbin.

Manchuria never belonged to Russia, but it is so situated that Russian interests there, political as well as economic, are of the utmost importance. Russia needs a free outlet to the ocean, and the road across Manchuria to Vladivostok is the shortest one to the Pacific ports. This fact forced the former Russian government to seek from China a concession for the building of a railroad across Manchuria.

Another reason for Russia's interest in this territory is based on the fact that northern Manchuria is the hinterland for Vladivostok and the Maritime province. The latter is a long, narrow tract of land adjoining the lower Amur, and if the vast territory of northern Manchuria, which is to the west of this province, should, with its well-developed system of railroads, become thickly populated by the Chinese or Japanese, this would become a source of constant danger to the Maritime province. Thus, the problem of Manchuria becomes for Russia not only an economic problem of transportation, but of political safety as well.

When the Russians completed, about forty years ago, the building of the railroad joining European Russia and Siberia with Vladivostok and the port of Dalny (now Dairen), Manchuria was still a wild and thinly populated region. The construction of the railroad caused, as is usually the case, rapid growth in population and great economic development. The truly American tempo of this progress is explained also by certain accompanying favorable circumstances. Three times during the first quarter of this century a golden rain, so to speak, fell upon Manchuria.

The first of these was the prosperity caused by the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway. The builders did not spare the government's money, and many contractors made their fortunes, and remained in Manchuria, continuing their enterprises as lumbermen, miners, and builders. In 1904-1905, during the Russo-Japanese War, gold again rained upon Manchuria. This time, other supply

contractors and merchants enriched themselves. A considerable amount of money was left in the pockets of the city inhabitants, and the newly established towns and cities grew and quickly accumulated riches. Since the end of the Russo-Japanese War, only northern Manchuria has remained in the sphere of Russian influence, and I shall hereafter refer only to this northern area.

During the first World War materials were transported across Manchuria into Russia and the city of Harbin, conveniently situated at the intersections of railroads and a navigable river (Sungari), became a center of supply and distribution. The city grew and developed quickly, and the Russian Revolution and the Civil War in Siberia did not stop this development. In Harbin were centralized various military organizations. There lived the representatives of different foreign countries, busy with the intervention in Siberia, and there the masses of refugees from Russia took shelter. Some of these refugees brought with them considerable amounts of money, and many brought valuable professional knowledge and experience. Many intellectuals came into Harbin and settled there. Russian refugees, however, were settling not only in Harbin, but also around important railroad stations, which gradually grew into small towns.

The Chinese government put at the disposal of the Chinese Eastern Railway not only the narrow tract of land for building the track itself, but also many lots for important railroad settlements. In this way cities of the Russian types came into existence, Harbin among them. Here were built railroad establishments, station houses, warehouses, barracks for troops guarding the railroad, homes and clubs for the employees, churches, and schools. Here, lots were assigned for both the Russian and Chinese banks, stores, and markets.

As soon as these railroad settlements became populated they took on the appearance of small Russian towns, and Harbin of a big Russian city. It preserves this appearance even at the present time.

The Russian inhabitants studied the Chinese language, while the Chinese studied Russian. Russian self-government, which was established in Harbin, was shared by the representatives of other nationalities. However, the Russians outnumbered all of them; they were at the head of the city administration, and business affairs were conducted in the Russian language.

Such was the state of affairs in 1920, when the White movement failed, and all power in Russia fell completely into the hands of the Soviet government. Since then, the history of Manchuria has been full of uncertainties, and the position of the Russians in Manchuria has radically changed three times, along with changes in the admin-

istration and status of the Chinese Eastern Railway. The first of these changes took place after the fall of the White movement; the second, after China's recognition of the U.S.S.R., and the appearance on the Chinese Eastern Railway of Soviet administration; and the third after the establishment of Japanese control and administration over the whole of Manchuria. In this article I shall review only the last of these three periods—that of Manchuria under Japanese control.

In September, 1931, the so-called "Manchurian incident" took place, and the Japanese Kwantung army occupied all northern and Southern Manchuria. If, in 1929, during the Sino-Russian conflict, Japan had remained neutral, this time it was to be the U.S.S.R. which was to remain neutral.

On February 18, 1932, the formation of the new state of Manchukuo was proclaimed. This new state was to remain under Japan's protectorate. In this way Japanese control was spread evenly over the sphere of Russian influence. The third period for the Russians in Manchuria had begun—the period of the destruction of Russian influence and the forcing of Russians out of Manchuria.

For a period of three years, 1932-1935, some of the Russians still remained on the Chinese Eastern Railway, but cooperation with the Japanese was a harder task than cooperation with the Chinese had been. Both sides, however, avoided open conflict, and finally reached some agreement. In March of 1935 the deed of sale of the Railway was signed in Tokyo. Soon thereafter, nearly all the employees of the Railway having Soviet passports sold their possessions in Manchuria and left for Russia. The Russian population in Manchuria diminished noticeably, as the Russians continued to either return to Russia, to move to the south, or to emigrate abroad. The Japanese population, on the other hand, quickly increased in number. The Russian population in Manchuria reached about 100,000 in 1930, but the census of 1940 showed that at that time only 54,000 still remained in Manchuria. Statistics show that the number of marriages and births also decreased. Thus, even the natural growth of the Russian population was on the wane.

Russian influence in Manchuria disappeared even more quickly than did the Russian population. Russian schools and colleges were closed. The Russian Polytechnical Institute was replaced by a Japanese Institute. For a while, a Manchurian univeristy existed for Russians, with departments of commerce and a polytechnical division, but the system of instruction and the program were both so poor that the graduates were prepared only for the most simple and rou-

tine technical work, or for positions as interpretors and clerks.

All Russian establishments and enterprises began to shrink as an inevitable result of the economic policy of Manchukuo. The introduction of monopolies made private business impossible. Metallurgic and lumber industries and the export business were placed under administrative control. High taxes and enforced loans destroyed capital. Foreign banks were closed, and Japanese banks gave credit only with official sanction. Low ceiling prices on rent took the profits from the homeowners. Briefly, the rich people lost their profits and are gradually losing even their capital.

The closing of many Russian and foreign enterprises has intensified the problem of unemployment. The Russian population, having lost the possibility not only to save but even to earn money, is now being obliged to spend its last savings and is gradually becoming poorer and poorer.

The Japanese support those of the intelligentsia who are loyal to them. They have given jobs, though poorly paid at that, to this group. In this way, the Japanese authorities are giving the means of existence to many former military officers, administrators, teachers, and writers. They are also giving help to several Russian charitable organizations, but always the impoverishment of the Russians increases.

More and more persons have become dependent upon the Japanese administration. There is one way and one way only: to accept a job from the hands of the Japanese. This is especially true in regard to the youth, which is prepared for this by the specially controlled educational system. But in order to receive employment it is not enough to be loyal to the Japanese; it is also necessary to preserve an anti-Soviet attitude. Although the Japanese government is officially supposed to be friendly with the U.S.S.R., open propaganda is being carried on against communism, the Comintern, and against the whole Soviet régime. The Russian population gets only very one-sided information about events going on in Russia; in print, only criticism of communism and Soviet Russia is allowed.

The guidance as well as the surveillance of all Russians is entrusted to the hands of a Bureau, which handles the affairs of the Russian emigrants living in the Manchurian Empire. This Bureau is located in Harbin, and is an establishment of large proportions. At its head is a general, and under him are several chiefs of departments. There are also local departments, which are located wherever there are more or less numerous groups of Russian emigrants. The Bureau is in charge of registering the emigrants, and those who are

unregistered are considered disloyal and are deprived of certain privileges, such as receiving the foodstuffs which are occasionally distributed on the recommendation of the Bureau. Those who are unregistered are also prevented from obtaining visas for going abroad.

The registered emigrants pay a certain monthly sum out of their net earnings. These monthly payments place at the disposal of the Bureau a considerable amount of money, so much in fact that the Bureau has free capital, is able to publish a newspaper, *The Voice of the Emigrant,* a weekly illustrated magazine, and books.

No play may be performed, no dance, lecture, or collection may take place without the permission of the Bureau. It also supervises education.

It is to be understood, of course, that the Bureau watches closely the political tendencies of the emigrants, supplying information about their behavior to the administration. The Chief of the Bureau is also President of the Far Eastern Union of Military Men, the membership of which is composed of former Russian officers (though there are many who did not join the union).

If the need should arise, the Bureau would be able to create a military organization quickly. Ataman Semenov, who is allowed to live near Dairen, has no official position, but his special representative occupies the post of adviser to the Bureau. A special department of the Bureau is in charge of hiring Russian emigrants for railroad service. Quite a few are so employed, among them several outstanding engineers. At the present time, all Russians are appointed to the same sector, which has thus become wholly Russian. Some accept this fact as an expression of confidence; others, mistrusting the Japanese, believe they are preparing a group of specialists to have on hand in case of Japanese occupation of Russian territory. Of course, the Bureau itself and all its employees may be used for this purpose in case of an emergency, as an organized administrative organ for the occupied territory.

The Bureau in Manchuria is a much more decent organization than similar organizations in Peking and in Tientsin. Often it gives real aid to Russian emigrants. But it must be understood, of course, that the Bureau may in no way be called an independent organization. It is wholly subordinated to the Japanese Military Mission in Harbin, which takes the place of a Military Governor General in northern Manchuria. The President of the Bureau and his assistants, the department managers, go to the Japanese Military Mission with daily reports. Prominent Russians whose opinions and actions in-

terest the Mission are also summoned there for questioning.

The fact that such a Bureau exists in Manchuria is interesting even if we forget our surmises about the future plans of Japan. It proves the existence and official preservation of Russian emigrants in Manchuria. But recently a certain disagreement occurred between the civil authorities of Manchukuo and the Military Mission. The government wanted all Russian emigrants to become automatically Manchurian subjects and so to occupy in the state the position of a national minority. But the military department considered as more useful the policy of preserving the Russian emigrants as such. One prominent Japanese official expressed the following opinion about the Russians: "Neither the Red nor White Russians like us. It is up to us to decide, according to political expediency, with which side to cooperate."

But what are the political views of the Russian emigrants in Manchuria? With few exceptions the tendency of the emigrants is sharply anti-communistic but at the same time patriotic. During the period of famine in Russia in 1922, Harbin collected considerable sums for the relief of the victims in the U.S.S.R. and sent special relief trains into Russia. At the present time, of course, Harbin does nothing for Russian relief and gives no help to war-torn Russia. To do so would be impossible as long as the Russian emigrants exist under the aegis of Japan, the ally of Russia's enemy. Otherwise, no doubt, the Russian population of Manchuria, notwithstanding its own impoverishment, would give all possible help to its brothers.

Several circumstances must be taken into consideration in order to understand clearly the political views of the Russian emigrants in Manchuria. First of all, it must be remembered that many Russians have been living there since the construction of the railroad. Many were born there, though they are nevertheless called emigrants. These Russians feel very painfully each curtailment of their rights, not to mention the dismissal of Russians from the leading institutions, and the complete abolition of Russian participation in the management of the region. Secondly, the proximity of the Russian border naturally increases the tendency to return to the native land. This is why Manchuria gave so many "homecomers," and why the movement of "reconciliation" was such a success. Finally, the Russians in Manchukuo live in an environment of strange culture, strange customs and a strange, difficult language. All in all, their complete assimilation in Manchukuo would seem to be highly improbable.

As a result of all these circumstances, Russian emigrants in Man-

churia feel their estrangement from the motherland as painfully as, perhaps, nowhere else in the world. The Russians live at the very border of their native country but know that they cannot return there because of the present régime, which they believe to be perilous to their native country. Some of them are ready to reconcile themselves with this régime, and either return to Russia or, barring that, to cooperate, on business grounds, with representatives of the Soviet administration. The supporters of this idea are mostly business men, not very stable in their principles. The other groups are still ready to oppose communism, and at the present time they still believe that this can be done with the help of Japanese arms. To this last category belong the Fascists.

We must mention one more trend of thought existing in present day Manchuria. This trend is represented by those who do not accept the Soviet régime or communism, but who strive to combat them not by force but with ideas. Following this principle, the theory of "Solidarity" was formulated in Harbin.[1]

More space in this article cannot be given to the description of this last theory, but it is clear how tragic the outbreak of war in the Far East would be for the great majority of Russians in Manchuria. On the other hand, the final expulsion of the Russians from Manchuria would be a great injustice, and a loss for Russia.

At one time a rumor was circulated in Harbin to the effect that Harbin would be proclaimed an international city and that the Japanese would accept this as a measure of compromise in order to reconcile the foreign powers to the existence of Manchukuo. Control of the city and the railroad would supposedly be given to an international committee. The rumor was met with enthusiasm. However, it had no basis in fact. But if, at some future time, such a plan should be effected, it would, in all probability, prove to be the best solution for a region where China holds the sovereignty, where Japan has invested colossal amounts of capital and has a population of 400,000, and where Russia has laid the foundation of economic and cultural development and is still interested in having transit passage and in assuring the safety of her border.

[1]G. C. Guins, *On the Road to the State of the Future: From Liberalism to Solidarity*. Harbin, 1930.

G. C. Guins and L. G. Zickman, *The Entrepreneur*. Harbin, 1940. See especially the article, "An Outline of Solidarity" by G. C. Guins.