The Russo-Japanese War and the first Russian Revolution interacted closely with one another. The war placed a strain on economic resources, hundreds of thousands of soldiers were mobilized in the various parts of the multiethnic empire and conveyed to the theater of war via the Trans-Siberian Railway. In the great land battles of Liaoyang and Mukden, the Russian troops were unable to achieve any victory against their tactically and technically superior enemy; the unsuccessful defense of Port Arthur, the defeat of the Baltic Fleet in the Straits of Tsushima let the course of the war become a complete disaster.1 This course of events, in turn, heated up the domestic political climate in Russia towards the end of 1904. Already during the banquet campaign, the Liberals in the zemstvo attributed the constant defeats to the political system they perceived as being outdated – the tsar’s government.2 When this Liberal opposition with its political demands for a parliament and free elections with an equal and secret ballot united with the workers’ social protest, leading to Bloody Sunday in St. Petersburg, Tsar Nicholas’s regime came under political pressure from home and abroad.3 A sequence of critical situations followed, reaching a climax from October to December, 1905, when the war had already been ended by the lenient Treaty of Portsmouth.4 This revolutionary situation at the end of 1905, which almost deprived the tsar of his throne, but nevertheless did not succeed in doing so, did not only take place in St. Petersburg, but also in the wide hinterland of the front, in Siberia and in Northeast Asia.

In this chapter, this hinterland is to be examined more closely, so to speak as a detail. It is of particular interest, therefore, because the soldiers, who came from the theater of war, or who had been readied for a war that was already over, were the main actors. How was it possible for such
extensive mutinies to come about in fall 1905? This question is also of a more general interest: looking at the Russo-Japanese War, we can say that the history of the mobilization for war is by far better analyzed, than the history of the demobilization of the Russian troops, although it seems to me that the way this demobilization happened is one of the key causes of the final outcome of the Russian revolution of 1905–06.

In St. Petersburg, in view of the difficulties directly on the doorstep, the government was little inclined to take account of complaints about an incipient state of ferment in Siberia and in the remote Amur region. References by the Governor General Kholshchevnikov were answered by the Ministry of the Interior with circulars which offered no help, not even instructions on how to act. Yet, from the local governor's perspective, there was justified reason for concern: apart from the fact that Siberia and Northeast Asia were the classic destinations for convicts and political exiles, the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway after 1890 had led to a growth in the number of workers. At each of the great railway stations of Tomsk, Omsk, and Chita, several thousand railway workers were stationed in auxiliary units. They offered fertile ground for agitation by the local organizations of the Social Democrats and Social Revolutionaries around the turn of the century. In the first year of the war, Krasnoyarsk developed into a stronghold of the Social Democrats, while in Chita the Social Revolutionaries were predominant.5

After Bloody Sunday in St. Petersburg, strikes took place along the line, especially in February, May, and August of 1905. The revolutionary parties’ local cells intensified their agitation among the reservists who were being transported to the theater of war. In the hinterland of the war, the supply conditions drove the local population, the railwaymen, who were prepared to strike, and also the reservists, into the arms of the revolutionaries. Already in April, 1905, basic foods were rationed in Blagoveschchensk. In view of the city overpopulated with civil refugees from Harbin, the Governor decided to requisition the stocks of grain held by the peasants in the surrounding countryside. In June, there was no more meat available in Chita, and, in mid-November, the commander-in-chief, General Nikolai Linievich, considered himself unable to supply the troops stationed in northern Manchuria with bread.6

In view of this development, both the civil and the military administrations east of the Urals showed themselves as not being up to the task. In response to the repeated requests by the Governor General, Kholshchevnikov, the Deputy Minister of the Interior, D.F. Trepov, who as Governor General of St. Petersburg enjoyed the tsar's high regard, informed him on September 3, 1905, that, in the event of disturbances, he should call in the inactive and thus available units of the Manchurian Army to suppress any unrest.7 Even after the October Manifesto, that gave the tsarist realm the prospect of civic liberties and a parliament,8 nothing changed in these instructions: on October 23 and 27, 1905, Trepov once again urged Kholshchevnikov to suppress unrest by heavy force, but at the same time to have regard for state property. In view of