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BETWEEN WAR AND REVOLUTION: RAILWAY BRIGADES IN SIBERIA, 1905-1907

Conversely, almost every association [Vergesellschaftung] tends to create consensual action [Einverständnshandeln] beyond the realm of its rational purposes.

Max Weber, Economy and Society, 1379.

"The peasant doesn't know how to fight for his rights, while the workers are already awakening."
"Then you'll teach them to fight," said the teacher.

Semen Kanatchikov, A Radical Worker in Tsarist Russia, 112.

On 9 December 1905 (Gregorian), General M. I. Bat'ianov, commander of the Third Manchurian Army, reviewed and addressed the ranks of the Order of St. George assembled in front of the railroad station at Yaomen, a hundred miles south of Rear Headquarters at Harbin and not much farther north from the recently pacified Russo-Japanese front.

Gentlemen, listen to the words of a man who has served fifty years and has little [time] left to live. I have served four tsars and I tell you that Russia became rich and powerful thanks to the tsars, not the people. We are sitting here and waiting to depart for Russia, I myself have ten children and we're all bursting to get home, and yet we are held here. The reason for this is the railway strike; the employees demand a raise: they don't have enough. What does the peasant get? Now railway battalions are being formed, and when we occupy the railway, then we'll drive the employees and their families and children into the cold.

Bat'ianov went on to suggest that the correct way to handle such matters had already been demonstrated in Tomsk on 3 November, when arson at the railroad offices touched off a pogrom in which about 600 employees died.

The employee strike committee, in control of the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER) since 7 December, immediately drafted protest telegrams to various military and railroad authorities and passed a resolution denying Bat'ianov the right to use the railway on his return trip to European Russia. The General-Manager of the CER, D. L. Khorvat, joined his voice to that of the strike committee in demanding that the army issue a statement making clear that his was not one of the offending railways. Bat'ianov and his family were forced to await evacuation until mid-January when a unit of the Trans-Amur Railway Brigade brought him safely out of Manchuria, despite calls from the First Manchurian Workers' Congress, meeting in the Harbin railway workshops, for someone to stop "His Black Hundred Highness" (ego chernosotennoe prevoskhoditel'stvo).2

In order to bring Bat'ianov to safety across Siberia, his escort had to pass through the Chita and Krasnoiarsk "Republics," where worker-soldier committees held sway. At these two sites, the location of Eastern Siberia's largest railroad depots and workshops, railway battalions had been instrumental in removing de facto control of both railroad and city from the Tsarist authorities. In contrast, the continuing loyalty of the Trans-Amur Railway Brigade would provide the railroading know-how for the Rennenkampf punitive expedition, whose westward progress from Harbin would snuff out the revolutionary movement east of Baikal. Why did identical institutions produce opposite political orientations? To answer this question, we will need to examine civil-military ties in Eastern Siberia and the railway brigade as an intermediary organization in an often tense relationship.3

I. The Setting: East of Baikal

Until the late nineteenth century, most of Siberia was little more than an armed camp, where military personnel and methods kept a tenuous grip on vast expanses of wilderness. Since relay time for communications to St. Petersburg was counted in months, governors-general wielded broad discretionary powers encompassing activities delegated to different specialized organs in the center. Since these Siberian satraps commanded the army units in their purview, they were of necessity all military men with field campaign experi-


3. Each railway "brigade" included several "battalions." I use the terms interchangeably. Several recent monographs highlight interministerial rivalries in late-imperial Russia, although only William Fuller, Civil-Military Conflict in Late Imperial Russia, 1881-1914 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985) focuses specifically on civil-military conflict.