

# Part 3: Siberia, Section 3

1899

## People :

Author : Peter Kropotkin

## Text :

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## Part Three

### Section III

In January, 1863, Poland rose against Russian rule. Insurrectionary bands were formed, and a war began which lasted for full eighteen months. The London refugees had implored the Polish revolutionary committees to postpone the movement. They foresaw that it would be crushed, and would put an end to the reform period in Russia. But it could not be helped. The repression of the nationalist manifestations which took place at Warsaw in 1861, and the cruel, quite unprovoked executions which followed, exasperated the Poles. The die was cast.

Never before had the Polish cause so many sympathizers in Russia as at that time. I do not speak of the revolutionists; but even among the more moderate elements of Russian society it was thought, and was openly said, that it would be a benefit for Russia to have in Poland a friendly neighbor instead of a hostile subject. Poland will never lose her national character, it is too strongly developed; she has, and will have, her own literature, her own art and industry. Russia can keep her in servitude only by means of sheer force and oppression,---a condition of things which has hitherto favored, and necessarily will favor, oppression in Russia herself. Even the peaceful Slavophiles were of that opinion; and while I was at school, St. Petersburg society greeted with full approval the "dream" which the Slavophile Iván Aksákoff

had the courage to print in his paper, "The Day." His dream was that the Russian troops had evacuated Poland, and he discussed the excellent results which would follow.

When the revolution of 1863 broke out, several Russian officers refused to march against the Poles, while others openly took their part, and died either on the scaffold or on the battlefield. Funds for the insurrection were collected all over Russia,---quite openly in Siberia,---and in the Russian universities the students equipped those of their comrades who were going to join the revolutionists.

Then, amid this effervescence, the news spread over Russia that, during the night of January 10, bands of insurgents had fallen upon the soldiers who were cantoned in the villages, and had murdered them in their beds, although on the very eve of that day the relations of the troops with the Poles seemed to be quite friendly. There was some exaggeration in the report, but unfortunately there was also truth in it, and the impression it produced in Russia was most disastrous. The old antipathies between the two nations, so akin in their origins, but so different in their national characters, woke once more.

Gradually the bad feeling faded away to some extent. The gallant fight of the always brave sons of Poland, and the indomitable energy with which they resisted a formidable army, won sympathy for that heroic nation. But it became known that the Polish revolutionary committee, in its demand for the reestablishment of Poland with its old frontiers, included the Little Russian or Ukrainian provinces, the Greek Orthodox population of which hated its Polish rulers, and more than once in the course of the last three centuries had slaughtered them wholesale. Moreover, Napoleon III. began to menace Russia with a new war,--- a vain menace, which did more harm to the Poles than all other things put together. And finally, the radical elements of Russia saw with regret that now the purely nationalist elements of Poland had got the upper hand, the revolutionary government did not care in the least to grant the land to the serfs,---a blunder of which the Russian government did not fail to take advantage, in order to appear in the position of protector of the peasants against their Polish landlords.

When the revolution broke out in Poland, it was generally believed in Russia that it would take a democratic, republican turn; and that the liberation of the serfs on a broad democratic basis would be the first thing which a revolutionary government,

fighting for the independence of the country, would accomplish.

The emancipation law, as it had been enacted at St. Petersburg in 1861, provided ample opportunity for such a course of action. The personal obligations of the serfs to their owners came to an end only on the 19th of February, 1863. Then, a very slow process had to be gone through in order to obtain a sort of agreement between the landlords and the serfs as to the size and the location of the land allotments which were to be given to the liberated serfs. The yearly payments for these allotments (disproportionally high) were fixed by law at so much per acre; but the peasants had also to pay an additional sum for their homesteads, and of this sum the maximum only had been fixed by the statute,---it having been thought that the landlords might be induced to forego that additional payment, or to be satisfied with only a part of it. As to the so-called "redemption" of the land,---in which case the government undertook to pay the landlord its full value in state bonds, and the peasants, receiving the land, had to pay in return, for forty-nine years, six per cent on that sum as interest and annuities,---not only were these payments extravagant and ruinous for the peasants, but no time was fixed for the redemption. It was left to the will of the landlord, and in an immense number of cases the redemption arrangements had not even been entered upon, twenty years after the emancipation.

Under such conditions a revolutionary government had ample opportunity for immensely improving upon the Russian law. It was bound to accomplish an act of justice towards the serfs---whose condition in Poland was as bad as, and often worse than in Russia itself---by granting them better and more definite terms of emancipation. But nothing of the sort was done. The purely nationalist party and the aristocratic party having obtained the upper hand in the movement, this fundamentally important matter was left out of sight. This made it easy for the Russian government to win the peasants to its side.

Full advantage was taken of this mistake when Nicholas Milútin was sent to Poland by Alexander II. with the mission of liberating the peasants in the way he intended doing it in Russia,---whether the landlords were ruined in consequence or not. "Go to Poland; apply there your Red program against the Polish landlords," said Alexander II. to him; and Milútin, together with Prince Cherkásky and many others, really did their best to take the land from the landlords and give good-sized

allotments to the peasants.

I once met one of the Russian functionaries who went to Poland under Milútin and Prince Cherkássky. "We had full liberty," he said to me, "to turn over the land to the peasants. My usual plan was to go and to convoke the peasants' assembly. 'Tell me first,' I would say, 'what land do you hold at this moment?' They would point it out to me. 'Is this all the land you ever held?' I would then ask. 'Surely not,' they would reply with one voice. 'Years ago these meadows were ours; this wood was once in our possession; these fields, too,' they would say. I would let them go on talking all over and then would ask: 'Now, which of you can certify under oath that this land or that land has ever been held by you?' Of course there would be nobody forthcoming,---it was all too long ago. At last, some old man would be thrust out from the crowd, the rest saying: 'He knows all about it; he can swear to it.' The old man would begin a long story about what he knew in his youth, or had heard from his father, but I would cut the story short. . . . 'State on oath what you know to have been held by the *gmína* (the village community), and the land is yours.' And as soon as he took the oath --- one could trust that oath implicitly --- I wrote out the papers and declared to the assembly: "Now, this land is yours. You stand no longer under any obligations whatever to your late masters: you are simply their neighbors; all you will have to do is to pay the redemption tax, so much every year, to the government. Your homesteads go with the land: you get them free.""

One can imagine the effect which such a policy had upon the peasants. A cousin of mine, Petr Nikoláevich Kropótkin, a brother of the aide-de-camp whom I have mentioned, was in Poland or in Lithuania with his regiment of uhlans of the guard. The revolution was so serious that even the regiments of the guard had been sent from St. Petersburg against it, and it is now known that when Mikhael Muravióff was sent to Lithuania and came to take leave of the Empress Marie, she said to him: "Save at least Lithuania for Russia!" Poland was regarded as lost.

"The armed bands of the revolutionists held the country," my cousin said to me, "and we were powerless to defeat them, or even to find them. Small bands over and over again attacked our smaller detachments, and as they fought admirably, and knew the country, and found support in the population, they often had the best of the skirmishes. We were thus compelled to march in large columns only. We would cross a region, marching through the woods, without finding any trace of the

bands; but when we marched back again, we learned that bands had reappeared in our rear; that they had levied the patriotic tax in the country; and if some peasant had rendered himself useful in any way to our troops, we found him hanged on a tree by the revolutionary bands. So it went on for months with no chance of improvement, until Milútin and Cherássky came and freed the peasants, giving them the land. Then---all was over. The peasants sided with us; they helped us to capture the bands, and the insurrection came to an end."

I often spoke with the Polish exiles in Siberia upon this subject, and some of them understood the mistake that had been made. A revolution, from its very outset, must be an act of justice towards "the downtrodden and the oppressed," not a promise of such reparation later on; otherwise it is sure to fail. Unfortunately, it often happens that the leaders are so much absorbed with mere questions of military tactics that they forget the main thing. For revolutionists not to succeed in proving to the masses that a new era has really begun for them is to insure the certain failure of their cause.

The disastrous consequences for Poland of this revolution are known; they belong to the domain of history. How many thousand men perished in battle, how many hundreds were hanged, and how many scores of thousands were transported to various provinces of Russia and Siberia is not yet fully known. But even the official figures which were printed in Russia a few years ago show that in the Lithuanian provinces alone---not to speak of Poland proper---that the terrible man, Mikhael Muravióff, to whom the Russian government has just erected a monument at Wílno, hanged by his own authority 128 Poles, and transported to Russia and Siberia 9423 men and women. Official lists, also published in Russia, give 18,672 men and women exiled to Siberia from Poland, of whom 10,407 were sent to East Siberia. I remember that the governor general of East Siberia mentioned to me the same number, about 11,000 persons, sent to hard labor or exile in his domains. I saw them there, and witnessed their sufferings. Altogether, something like 60,000 or 70,000 persons, if not more, were torn out of Poland and transported to different provinces of Russia, to the Urals, to Caucasus, and to Siberia.

For Russia the consequences were equally disastrous. The Polish insurrection was the definitive close of the reform period. True, the law of provincial self-government

(*Zémstvovs*) and the reform of the law courts were promulgated in 1864 and 1866; but both were ready in 1862, and, moreover, at the last moment Alexander II. gave preference to the scheme of self-government which had been prepared by the reactionary party of Valúeff as against the scheme that had been prepared by Nicholas Milútin; and immediately after the promulgation of both reforms, their importance was reduced, and in some cases destroyed, by the enactment of a number of by-laws.

Worst of all, public opinion itself took a further step backward. The hero of the hour was Katkóff, the leader of the serfdom party, who appeared now as a Russian "patriot," and carried with him most of the St. Petersburg and Moscow society. After that time those who dared to speak of reforms were at once classed by Katkóff as "traitors to Russia."

The wave of reaction soon reached our remote province. One day in March a paper was brought by a special messenger from Irkútsk. It intimated to General Kúkel that he was at once to leave the post of governor of Transbaikália and go to Irkútsk, waiting there for further orders, and that he was not to reassume the post of commander of the general staff.

Why? What did that mean? There was not a word of explanation. Even the governor-general, a personal friend of Kúkel, had not run the risk of adding a single word to the mysterious order. Did it mean that Kúkel was going to be taken between two gendarmes to St. Petersburg, and immured in that huge stone coffin, the fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul? All was possible. Later on we learned that such was indeed the intention; and so it would have been done but for the energetic intervention of Count Nicholas Muravióff, "the conqueror of the Amúr," who personally implored the Czar that Kúkel should be spared that fate.

Our parting with Kúkel and his charming family was like a funeral. My heart was very heavy. I not only lost in him a dear personal friend, but I felt also that this parting was the burial of a whole epoch, full of long-cherished hopes, - "full of illusions," as it became the fashion to say.

So it was. A new governor came, - a good-natured, leave-me-in-peace man. With renewed energy, seeing that there was no time to lose, I completed our plans for the reform of the system of exile and municipal self-government. The governor

made a few objections here and there for formality's sake, but finally signed the schemes, and they were sent to headquarters. But at St. Petersburg reforms were no longer wanted. There our projects lie buried still, with hundreds of similar ones from all parts of Russia. A few "improved" prisons, even more terrible than the old unimproved ones, have been built in the capitals, to be shown during prison congresses to distinguished foreigners; but the remainder, and the whole system of exile, were found by George Kennan in 1886 in exactly the same state in which I left them in 1862. Only now, after thirty-five years have passed away, the authorities are introducing the reformed tribunals and a parody of self-government in Siberia, and committees have been nominated again to inquire into the system of exile.

When Kennan came back to London from his journey in Siberia, he managed, on the very next day after his arrival in London, to hunt up Stepniák, Tchaykóvsky, myself, and another Russian refugee. In the evening we all met at Kennan's room in a small hotel near Charing Cross. We saw him for the first time, and having no excess of confidence in enterprising Englishmen who had previously undertaken to learn all about the Siberian prisons without even learning a word of Russian, we began to cross-examine Kennan. To our astonishment, he not only spoke excellent Russian, but he knew everything worth knowing about Siberia. One or another of us had been acquainted with the greater proportion of all political exiles in Siberia, and we besieged Kennan with questions: "Where is So and So? Is he married? Is he happy in his marriage? Does he still keep fresh in spirit?" We were soon satisfied that Kennan knew all about every one of them.

When this questioning was over, and we were preparing to leave, I asked, "Do you know, Mr. Kennan, if they have built a watchtower for the fire brigade at Chitá?" Stepniák looked at me, as if to reproach me for abusing Kennan's goodwill. Kennan, however, began to laugh, and I soon joined him. And with much laughter we tossed each other questions and answers: "Why, do you know about that?" "And you too?" "Built?" "Yes, double estimates!" and so on, till at last Stepniák interfered, and in his most severely good-natured way objected: "Tell us at least what you are laughing about." Whereupon Kennan told the story of that watchtower which his readers must remember. In 1859 the Chitá people wanted to build a watchtower, and collected the money for it; but their estimates had to be

sent to St. Petersburg. So they went to the ministry of the interior; but when they came back, two years later, duly approved, all the prices for timber and work had gone up in that rising young town. This was in 1862, while I was at Chitá. New estimates were made and sent to St. Petersburg, and the story was repeated for full twenty-five years, till at last the Chitá people, losing patience, put in their estimates prices nearly double the real ones. These fantastic estimates were solemnly considered at St. Petersburg, and approved. This is how Chitá got its watchtower.

It has often been said that Alexander II. committed a great fault, and brought about his own ruin, by raising so many hopes which later on he did not satisfy. It is seen from what I have just said - and the story of little Chitá was the story of all Russia - that he did worse than that. It was not merely that he raised hopes. Yielding for a moment to the current of public opinion around him, he induced men all over Russia to set to work, to issue from the domain of mere hopes and dreams, and to touch with the finger the reforms that were required. He made them realize what could be done immediately, and how easy it was to do it; he induced them to sacrifice whatever of their ideals could not be immediately realized, and to demand only what was practically possible at the time. And when they had framed their ideas, and had shaped them into laws which merely required his signature to become realities, then he refused that signature. No reactionist could raise, or ever has raised, his voice to assert that what was left - the unreformed tribunals, the absence of municipal self-government, or the system of exile - was good and was worth maintaining: no one has dared to say that. And yet, owing to the fear of doing anything, all was left as it was; for thirty-five years those who ventured to mention the necessity of a change were treated as suspects; and institutions unanimously recognized as bad were permitted to continue in existence only that nothing more might be heard of that abhorred word "reform."

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