

Chapter X

The Vengeance of God



Sergeant Sergei Ossinin rubbed his eyes, shook his head and then opened his eyes again. He had a childish wish that all this was a dream—the revolution, the bloody and brutal civil war and the hate and chaos in his country. There were the same green undulating hills with the knolls of ever cheerful birth trees, ever trembling aspens, evergreen pines and dusty country roads with many ruts. There was a long line of horsemen with slightly swinging lances in front of him, a cloud of fine dust all around him, and many nasty horse flies hovering above him.

Zuka was in the 1st Cavalry Division of admiral Kolchak's army. The admiral was the head of the Russian National Anti-Communist Government which was now recognized by all the great powers.

Sergeant Ossinin was not sure about the date but finally settled on May 15, 1919. By this time the political situation in Russia had polarized into two factions: the Red Army of Lenin against the White Army of Admiral Kolchak who had headquarters in Omsk, Siberia. The Admiral's political ideas were somewhat vague; something about the self determination of Russian people to decide their future. No one actually knew what that meant.

Mr Lenin, head of the communist government expressed his political ideas very clearly. He supported a dictatorship of the world proletariat, peace for the peasants and war on the palaces, all power to the working class and the elimination of the enemies of the people which included the nobles, the clergy, officers of the White Army and any others not of the labor or peasant class.

Admiral Kolchak was a good admiral but a bad politician. Mr. Lenin was not an admiral but he was an extremely astute politician and as such he did not make the political mistakes that Admiral Kolchak did. For example, the admiral retained the uniform of the imperial army for his forces and in so doing connected himself to the ill fated monarchy. Mr. Lenin attracted the former czar's best officers and generals. The most capable joined his ranks, while the most stupid, conceited and pompous joined the White Army. The results were disastrous.

But at that moment Sergeant Ossinin's mind was not on politics. He was busy appraising the present military situation. He was with the 1st Cavalry Division, 3rd Horse Battery, and head of the scout squad. The division was marching toward Krasno-ufinsk, a rather prosperous town a hundred miles from Ekaterinburg, with an order to contact and engage the infamous Red Lions, Leo Trotsky's own regiment. He had come to this assignment in a rather round about way. After evacuating from Bougoulma, Zuka had fought for a time with the White Russian Army in Samara. In the fall of 1918 all high school seniors were ordered from the front and advised to complete their education. So Zuka went to Siberia where his uncle Y.B. Klouchnicov was a

professor at Omsk High School. He graduated after the 1918-1919 winter term. Then, by merit of his gold medal, awarded for scholarship, Zuka was accepted at the Ekaterinburg School of Mines. That placed him in a privileged position as a volunteer student in the army if he wanted it.

Uncle Klouchnicov was also minister of foreign affairs in the admiral's National Government, so Zuka had direct access to Omsk politics. But Zuka did not like what he heard or saw in the dirty political kitchen in Omsk. He was not interested in a career in politics like his uncle. His father and brother Matthew were serving in the National People's Army. So he decided to join the 1st Cavalry Division, which was reputed to be the best military unit. It was composed of two Lancer regiments, Dragoon and Hussar regiments and three horse batteries.

Zuka persuaded several of his school mates to enlist in the horse artillery. Thus the 3rd Horse was made up of students, except for the battery horse teams which were composed exclusively of Tartars. Corporal Matthew Ossinin had seen to that. In April of 1919 Sergeant Sergie Ossinin's division was quartered in Ekaterinburg and in surrounding villages. The 3rd Horse worked closely with the dragoons of Kazan as a unit. So they were quartered at the small village of Ouktoose, a few miles from town and headquarters. Zuka learned more about the massacre of Nicholas II and his family in Ekaterinburg. This new information made a deep and lasting impression on him. He was thinking about it as he swayed slightly in the saddle on the march to Krasno-ufimsk.

The Confession

Sergeant Ossinin had time of his hands. It was a Sunday in April of 1919. On the spur of the moment he decided to run in to Ekaterinburg and to get the latest news from his friend at headquarters. He saddled his horse Dahir, which he had been able to keep in Omsk, and rode leisurely to town. After tethering his horse, he entered the house and immediately knew something was wrong. Headquarters was usually quite on Sunday, but today it was crowded with a number of high brass and many agitated soldiers. Zuka located his friend and asked what was happening.

The young aid-de-camp took him aside and explained "This morning a man, dressed in dirty khaki, came to headquarters. He said his name was Medviedev and that he was one of the squad who participated in killing Emperor Nicholas and his family. Now he cannot sleep at night. For months he has been dreaming of the murder scene. He says he cannot stand it anymore. He wishes to surrender to the military authorities and throw himself on the mercy of the government. Sergeant Ossinin was agog to actually see one of the murderers of the emperor!

"Now Lieutenant General Milovitch, commander of the division, will examine him in front of all the officers present. Stay here Zuka, but make yourself scarce so no one will notice you."

Zuka inched his way along side the wall to the window. He found a perch on the window sill and was all attention. The room was fairly crowded with officers. At the far end of the room sat general Milovitch. At the table with him Zuka recognized colonel Govorov, commander of his brigade, colonel Ashanin, commander of the Lancers of Simbrisk, captain Prince Krapotkin, of the Dragoons; colonel Romanov, and colonel Palchikov of the Hussars. He did not know the rest of the officers.

General Milovitch raised his voice: "Bring the man in."

There was a light commotion as two officers conducted a man between them into the room. Zuka knew one of the officers Lieutenant Danilov of the Dragoons. He looked around the room. There was no one from the 3rd Horse, nor from the 2nd Horse either. The officers conducted the man in and stopped him about eight feet from the general. He wore an old and dirty khaki uniform. He was tall but strong. He had dark hair, deep sunken eyes, and a lean face with fallen cheeks covered with stubs of an unkept red beard. The man was visibly nervous but anyone would be in that situation.

General Milovitch looked at the man long and speculatively. "Now listen carefully. You came this morning and surrendered yourself voluntarily to the officer of the day. You said your name was Medviedev and that you were one of the squad that killed the czar. Is that right?"

"Yes, your excellency."

"Now are you willing to tell us how the Emperor and his family were killed? We have a man here who will take down your confession in shorthand."

"Yes, your excellency."

"Well then, tell us what happened in your own words."

"Yes, your excellency," he said, shuffling his feet. With great effort he forced himself to relive the terrible past.

"I was a sergeant in the Petrograd 1st machine gun regiment. I joined the communist party in 1917 and took part in the October Revolution. Soon after I was assigned several jobs for the party in Moscow. In 1918, I was ordered to go to Ekaterinburg and report to comrade commissar Yourovsky. I did. Yourovsky told me that the former czar was there with his family and they were heavily guarded. I would be in a special squad to guard the guards. We were to obey without question no matter what the orders might be. We were a privileged squad. Life there was alright until one night in July..."

Here he stopped for a short while, as if he did not want to say the date, it was too painful. But we all knew the date only too well. It was July 16th, 1918. He continued.

“It was a warm night. Yourovsky woke me up and ordered me to dress and be ready, battle ready. I dressed, got my rifle and ammunition and walked out. The squad was there and ready. We followed Yourovsky to the Ipatiev’s house and entered through the rear door and descended into a cellar. It was not a big cellar. One naked light bulb hung from the ceiling. It gave enough light. The tzar’s whole family was there. The tzar was sitting on a chair, his son not exactly on his lap, but rather half standing, half sitting. The tzar was holding him by the waist. Both wore Khaki uniforms. The tzar wore the cross of St. George. The tzarina was sitting on the other chair. Her daughter, Tatiana whom I remembered from her hospital work, was next to the tzarina with her hand on the back of her chair. The other older princess was on the tzar’s side. The two younger girls were behind. They were all dressed in light blouses and darker skirts. Yourovsky lined us up and without saying anything, he issued an order.

“Squad ready. Squad fire!”

The first two volleys were orderly. The tzar was hit by several bullets, and toppled from his chair. The tzarevitch was lying across his legs. The tzarina fell from her chair onto her side. A red spot was spreading on her white blouse. Then we lost our heads and it was wild shooting. Yourovsky was hollering “Cease fire!” but nobody was paying any attention to him. He snatched a rifle from one man’s hands and threatened to shoot us. We ceased fire. The cellar was in a terrible mess with bodies strewn all over the floor. Then Yourovsky ordered us to run every one of the bodies through twice with our bayonets. I did not do it. Others did. One younger man was retching in the corner. Yourovsky carefully examined the all the bodies to see if they were dead. He was in no hurry; he wanted to be very sure they were dead. Then he gathered all of us up and told us to load the bodies on the truck. He said that he was going to take the bodies out of Ekaterinburg and burn them all. The fires were ready for him and he was to throw all the bodies into the fire right away. But first, the tzar’s and tzarina’s head were to be cut off and put into a jar with alcohol to be sent to Moscow. He ordered two men to ride on the running boards of the truck. The rest of us were ordered to return to the barracks and to keep quiet about what had happened. Early in the morning Yourovsky and his men returned, dusty with soot, tired and red eyed. They washed themselves and went to bed. When the White Army came. I did not retreat with the others. I stayed behind. I was losing sleep, envisioning the bodies lying on the floor. That is all, your excellency.”

In a way he seemed relieved. A deep silence descended upon the room. The officers looked at the man with horror. They were affected but kept themselves under control.

General Milovitch rose, looked over the room and asked:

“Any questions?”

One of the officers started to say something and then stopped. There was nothing to say, nothing to ask.

General Milovitch, his face set, said to Medviedev “I have no jurisdiction over you. I am a general not a judge. I cannot court martial you either. I will send you to Omsk, under guard, with a copy of your confession. Let the government deal with you there.”

“Take him back and place him under heavy guard. As soon as possible I will send him to Omsk. Gentlemen, you are dismissed.”

Zuka Ossinin was not sure how Omsk treated Medviedev. Probably Omsk would not be interested in him. Right after the White Army occupied Ekaterinburg, Kolchak’s Government appointed Inspector Sokolov to make a complete investigation of the murder of the imperial family. Sokolov did a good job. He even published a book with many pictures including the location where the bodies of the czar’s family were burned. There were even photos of articles and jewelry that belonged to the grand duchesses. So for Omsk, there was nothing new, only a few more details.

The Imposter

No matter how careful Yourovsky was, a few months later in April of 1919 in Akmalinsky district, a completely ignorant and illiterate country oaf of about twenty years of age, who stood six feet tall and had red hair, declared himself to be Tzarevitch Alexis, heir to the throne. In a short time he was successful raising an army and Kolchak’s government had to send special investigators and a battalion of infantry to squash the uprising there.

It was simply incredible people could believe that a fourteen-year-old boy, Tzarevitch Alexis, after being shot and run twice through with bayonets, could stand up in front of Yourovsky and his men, walk out of the cellar and walk several miles to the communist infested town of Ekaterinburg! And there knock at the first house he came to and receive expert medical help! How could people believe such a thing? How could Yourovsky possibly miss the body of Grand Duke Alexis as he burned and buried the rest of the family? Preposterous! Completely impossible! But Zuka was not surprised for there were many imposters who claimed. to be rightful heirs to the imperial throne throughout Russian history.

The Red Lions

Sergeant Ossinin’s gloomy musings while he rode were suddenly interrupted by the sound of bugles signaling “Halt!” A young Dragoon lieutenant galloped toward the commander of the 3rd Horse, Lt. Colonel Bogdanv. Sergeant Ossinin was in position—three paces behind and one to his right. His squad was right behind him.

The lieutenant reined in his horse and smartly saluted.

“Colonel Sire, we have intelligence that the Red Lions just pulled out of Krasnoufimsk. They are retreating fast. A head squadron is to occupy the town. The commander of the division

has ordered your scouts to join the head squadron to reconnoiter the terrain for artillery position in the case artillery will be needed.”

“Thanks, Lieutenant, will do!” He turned his head.

“Sergeant Ossinin!”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Send four men to the squadron.”

“Yes Sir, I will go myself.”

“I wish I could go myself,” commented the commander of the battery.

Sergeant Ossinin raised three spread fingers above his head. No command was necessary. The squad behind heard the order just as well as he did. He slightly touched the flanks of his faithful Dahi and galloped out of the column. He was glad for the freedom of the road. They were riding fast alongside the motionless regiments, hurrying to join the squadron well ahead of them. They soon reported to a bearded Hussar Captain who looked indifferently at the newcomers.

“Alright, Sergeant, fall in with your men.”

The squadron galloped over the hill toward Krasnoufimsk. A white church with gilded cross stood amidst a sea of green trees that masked the houses from view.

The commander of the squadron raised his naked saber then the the squadron formed a semi-circle or fan formation. All was quiet. The squadron, now at a light gallop and increasing in speed, approached the outskirts of the town. Sergeant Ossinin was right in the middle. No sign of the enemy. At an open gallop, the squadron moved along the wide main street of the town. Ossinin spurred Dahir and the golden thoroughbred, eager to oblige, easily outdistanced the rest. With his mane and tail in the air he thundered into the town square.

What Ossinin saw was a nightmare of blood-chilling horror. In shock he reigned in his mount so hard, so incredibly hard, that the horse first reared up and then went down on his haunches with forelegs digging deep into the dust.

Along the two sides of the square a number of crosses had been erected; men had been crucified on those crosses. They hung naked to the waist, covered with dust and blood. Only their breeches identified them as former officers of the imperial Russian army. At the foot of the crosses several fires were smouldering. The heavy smell of burned flesh hung in the motionless air.

Mangled white bodies of young girls were strewn at the foot of other crosses. They lay as immobile as sculptured statues, in horrible poses. They were covered with blood and all were dead. It was the work of the Red Lions, and not the first horror of this kind. Zuka heard the mad gallop of a horse and a second later, a young Lancer, wearing the insignia of student volunteer, crossed the square at a mad pace. The youth slid from his horse, ran to one of the crosses and embraced the knees of the crucified man hanging there. A vibrating sob, a sob of infinite pain and anguish filled the small square. Beating his head against the blood covered legs and looking into the face of the man, he called out:

“Father...why ...why father...what for?”

The closed eyes, as if in answer to the plea, slowly and painfully opened. For a second a flicker of intelligence glimmered in the eyes of the broken and dying man. The blue lips, covered with dried blood, croaked automatically the sacred pledge of the Russian imperial army.

“For faith, for the tzar, for the country.”

The head dropped. But this time the eyes remained open.

An anger, an all powerful anger with icy cold fingers, choked Sergeant Ossinin. For a while he could not get his breath; the icy finger held his heart. The bright day seemed perceptibly darker. He felt nauseous and close to blacking out. He dropped his reigns, clutching the pommel, he slightly rocked back in his saddle.

A very young Dragoon Lieutenant, green faced, slithered slowly from his saddle, grasped the stirrup leather and was violently sick. The troopers, veterans of the German war, sat in their saddles motionless, unable to understand or grasp the scene before them. Several turned their horses and hurried out of the square. Others got off their horses to vomit.

The square began to fill with hysterical women, throwing themselves on the dead bodies of their daughters, kissing their cold dead faces.

In his anger Sergeant Ossinin impulsively stretched his hands up in front of him as if appealing to the skies. He looked around at the horrible square, at the serene church with its gilded cross. He looked at the peaceful imperturbable blue sky and in a sibilant whisper challenged.

“Do you really exist God? If you do how could you let this happen?” You who had been crucified yourself and know the agony and the pain! Do you really exist?” But there was no answer from the church, nor from the blue sky.

“Vengeance is mine,” saith the Lord, “I will render,” came the whisper.

And then scornfully to the skies.

“Lord, Where is your vengeance?”

Engaging the Enemy

A few days later Zuka’s Division was amassed on the outskirts of a sparse forest. Staccato machine gun fire could be heard from the open fields. The troops dismounted and answered the fire. They held the measured advance of the Red infantry. Nearer and nearer the red flags started to outflank their forces. The commander of the division lowered his field glasses and turning, called out:

“Order the 3rd Horse to hold the Reds.”

The 3rd Horse was marching at the head of the column, just behind the Dragoons who were trotting from the woods. Sergeant Ossinin could see an even field covered with new green grass. In the distance he saw the high minaret of the mosque, a Tartar village, the border of the forest, the woods themselves and a long low hedge leading in to the village; a typical Russian landscape.

A well ordered line of Red infantry was slowly advancing. The quiet was shattered by the derisive laughter of the machine guns. Amid the green carpet of the field, bright red stains of the communist standards fluttered. The 3rd Horse began riding at a broad pace across the green carpet, trampling the silver grass. They held firm as the first bullets buzzed past them.

Riding at a gallop and bending slightly in their saddles, riders anxiously crossed the horses with their whips. Sergeant Ossinin lightly spurred Dahir, then leveled to talk to the commander of the battery and receive instructions from him about the battery’s position. He raised his fist over his head and signaled the “all square.” Then he gave the impatient Dahir his head.

In the middle of the green field Ossinin sharply reined in his horse and raised his hand to indicate the position of the battery. Four scouts simultaneously threw their reins to the spare riders, jumped from their mounts, ran to their stations, turned to face the enemy and froze. The battery made a two-wheel turn around the scouts then stopped for a second. The caissons, without the guns and encouraged by the bullets, were spreading all over the green grass on their way to the woods.

Ossinin joined his commander at his station, three paces behind and one to the right, thirty feet from the battery. Suddenly he saw, as if by magic, thousands of tiny gnomes with thousands of tiny shovels throwing the dust into the air. The enemy shells were too close for comfort.

“The battery is ready.” The chief officer sang out.

Colonel Bagdanov, still looking straight ahead, gave the order.

“Shrapnel. Aim 10. Fuse 5. Rapid fire.”

“On the way from the battery,” said the chief officer.

The 3rd Horse opened fire. Again, as if by magic, the gnomes disappeared and a swarm of angry bees buzzed over head. This was even worse. The bees in turn were transformed into invisible hail that pelted against the gun’s shields.

With the gun crew working at feverish speed, the sharp reports of rapid fire followed one after another, kicking green turf into the air. The 3rd Horse Battery was busy, terribly busy. The red flags had retreated to the rear, but the lines were gaining closer and closer.

“Grape shot!” sounded the Commander of the Battery.

The lines were too damn close.

The heavy beating of flying hoofs was heard in the intervals between the fire. On the right, across the same green field, the 2nd Horse Battery was advancing in open-front formation to meet the enemy. The commander of the battery lowered his naked sword in front of his huge bay horse. He wore four crosses of St. George on his uniform which sparkled in the sun as the big sergeant major galloped forward. A few minutes later the 2nd Horse Battery opened fire.

Then the 1st Horse, last in the column, moved up and also opened fire.

The Red lines could not hold any more. They lay down, tried to rise, once, twice, but the wide iron boom of grape shot continually pushed them back. Finally the line, slowly at first, then faster and faster, retreated.

Ossinin looked back to the outskirts of the forest. Already the squadrons, one after another, were flying from the woods to get ready for the charge. A sharp trumpet signaled the cavalry forward. They rapidly gained momentum. The regiments, with their multi-colored lance standards fluttering merrily in the breeze, passed the silent guns. The Artillery had done it’s part. Now it was up to the Cavalry to finish off the Red Lions.

Once again the trumpets sang out. Over the head of the leading horseman a sword flashed like a streaking comet. In response, the lances fell to the level of the horse’s head. At the same moment a broad fan of riders rushed forward with a silver wave of unsheathed swords. The machine guns suddenly choked with laughter. Simultaneously the metallic voices of the trumpets urgently ordered “charge!”

The division surged ahead, the orderly lines of the regiments curved. The entire division, fighting mad with the vision of the village crucifixions still fresh in their minds, charged.

“Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord. I will render!”

That day, He delegated His vengeance to the First Cavalry Division who completely hacked and smashed Trotsky’s Red Lions. On that day the White Nationalist forces in one segment of Siberia were triumphant. Their fury over the crucifixion of the village soldiers and their young daughters drove them to victory. In the long run, the White armies would be defeated on the fields of battle all across Russia and the Red armies of communism would triumph. Russia’s course would be altered for decades to come.