

RED RUSSIA

(By John Reid.—By Permission of Liberator.)

(Continued)

THE DEATH MARCH

A Squadron of Cossacks, rifles on backs, road up the street with their peaked caps over one ear, and their "love-locks" very prominent. The leader was playing together in a chorus. Then a Lettish regiment came marching along down, swinging their arms and singing the slow Lettish Death March, so solemn and courageous. As they went along comrades ran out from the sidewalk to kiss them farewell. They were bound for the line of fire.

In the town-hall sat the Refugee Committee, almost swamped by the thousands of people who had fled before the advance of the Germans or the retreat of the Russians—homeless, helpless. The committee had originally been created by the Imperial government, but since the revolution all members are elected by the refugees themselves. The secretary took us down into the foul, flooded cellar where every day were fed seven thousand women, children and old men.

LOOT.

"Why did the Russian soldiers loot?" he repeated, thoughtfully. He himself was a Lett. "Well, there were the criminal elements that every army has, and then there were hungry men. Considering the general disorganization it is remarkable they looted so little. Then you must understand that the Russian soldiers have always been taught that on a retreat it is a patriotic duty to drive out the civilian population and destroy everything to prevent it falling into the enemy's hands. But the most important reason is that the Russians were suspicious of the Lettish population, which they thought were Germanophile, and the reactionary officers encouraged this resentment. Hideous things have been done by counter-revolutionary provocateurs."

WAR AS A CLASS ISSUE.

The Russian soldiers really consider the Baltic provinces alien territory and do not see why they should defend it. And they have looted, fobbed. But in spite of all, it is only the German overlords who want the Germans to come in, and the bourgeoisie which depends upon them; the rest of the population has had a belly-full of German civilization, and the workers, soldiers and landless laborers have long been Social-Democrats, thoroughly in sympathy with the Revolution. That is why the war against Germany was so universally popular in Livonia — it was a class issue.

A WORKING CLASS ARMY.

This was corroborated at the office of the Iskolostreel — the Executive Committee of the Lettish Sharpshooters, of which nine regiments some 15,000 men, belonged to the Twelfth Army. The Letts are almost all bolsheviks and relied almost altogether

upon their own organization, a really revolutionary crowd of fine young fighters. Originally a volunteer corps of the bourgeoisie, the sharpshooters had finally been reorganized to include all the Letts drafted into the Russian Army, until it was overwhelmingly a working-class body.

VISITORS.

Word had gone about that Americans were in town — the first within the memory of local mankind — and we had visitors. First was a school teacher, who spoke French, a little man with a carefully-trimmed beard and gold-rimmed glasses, who declared he was a member of the Intelligentsia and approved of revolutions, but not of the class struggle. He averred that he had been deputed by the peasants of his village to come and ask us how to end the war. Then there was a fat German-American baker by the name of Witt, who had an American passport and had lived in Cincinnati. He professed himself to be a great admirer of President Wilson, had a very hazy idea of the Russian revolution, and came for advice as to where to emigrate; was the bakery business very profitable in Siberia? Finally a sleek, oily prosperous looking peasant, who represented the Lettish Independence Movement, and deluged us with bad history and shady statistics to prove the yearning desire of every Lett that Livonia should be an independent country — a desire which we already knew was almost non-existent.

The Iskolostreel Investigates.

Bright and early next morning thundered at our door Dodparouchik Peterson, secretary of the Iskolostreel. The soldiers' committee of the Second Lettish Brigade had sent in a complaint about the inefficiency of sixteen officers; a delegate of the Iskosol and the Iskolostreel was going down to the lines to see about it; did we want to come along?

This time it was an ambulance which carried us, together with Dr. Nahumson, the delegate army surgeon, holder of several German university degrees, veteran revolutionist and prominent member of the Bolshevik faction. We had aboard also about half a ton of Bolshevik papers — Saldat and Rabotchie Poot — to distribute along the front. No passes were necessary, for nobody dared stop such a powerful personage.

"The condition of the army? the doctor shrugged his shoulders and smiled unpleasantly. "What do you want? Our French, English and American comrades do not send us the supplies they promised. Is it possible that they are trying to starve the Revolution?"

THE DEATH PENALTY.

We asked about the death penalty in the army, over which such a bitter controversy was raging between the radicals and reactionaries.

"Consider," he replied, "what the death penalty in this army signified. Today I will show you regiments, en-

tirely Bolshevik, who have been reduced four thousand men to seven — in this last month's fighting. In all the Twelfth Army there have only been sixty men officially proclaimed deserters since the fall of Riga. No, my friend, Mr. Kerensky's death penalty has not been applied to cowards, deserters and mutineers. The death penalty in the Russian Army is for Bolsheviks, for agitators, who can be shot down without trial by the revolver of an officer. Luckily they have not tried it here — they do not dare. . . ."

Whenever we passed a group of soldiers, Peterson threw out a bundle of papers; he held a pile on his lap, and doled them out one by one to passers by. Thousands of papers with the reactionary program of the new coalition government — suppression of the Soviets, iron discipline in the army, war to the uttermost. . . .

REACTIONARY OFFICERS.

Brigade staff headquarters were in a brick farm-house on a little hill amid wooded meadows. In the living room the officers sat at a long table, a polkovnik, his lieutenant-colonel and a group of smart youths wearing the cords of staff duty, eating stchi, mountains of meat, and drinking interminable tea in a cloud of cigarette smoke. They welcomed us with great cordiality and a torrent of Moscow French — which is very like that of Stratford; and in fifteen minutes Dr. Nahumson and the Colonel were bitterly disputing politics.

The Colonel was a frank reactionary — out to crush Germany, still loyal to Nicholas the Second, convinced that the country was ruined by the Revolution, and utterly opposed to the soldier's committees.

"The trouble with the army," he said, "is that it is concerned about politics. Soldiers have no business to think."

All the rest followed their superior's lead. The podpolkovnik, a round merry person with winking eyes, informed me confidentially that "no officer of any character or dignity would have any dealings with the soldier's committees."

"Are there no officers who work with the committees?" I asked.

He shrugged disdainfully. "A few. But we call them the demagogue officers, and naturally don't associate with them."

PITY THE OFFICER.

The others volunteered further interesting information. In the first place, according to them, there were no bolsheviks in the army — except the committees. The Lettish troops are ignorant and illiterate. The committees interfere seriously with military operations. And the masses of soldiers are bitterly jealous of the workmen in the towns, who get phenomenal wages and only work eight hours, while "we are on duty here twenty-four hours a day."

By this time we had sat at the table two long hours, drinking tea and smoking, during which time the entire staff did absolutely nothing but talk. One tall boy, with a smell of brillantine floating around his shining hair, went over to the piano and began idly fingering waltzes. Occasionally two bent and aged peasants, man and woman, she with bare feet, crept through the room to the tiny closet they had been allowed to keep for themselves. An hour later, when we left to go to the soldiers'

committee, the staff of the Second Lettish Brigade was still "working twenty-four hours a day," and expressing its honest resentment against the factory workers of Moscow and Petrograd. . . .

FRATERNIZATION.

The way to the Committee led down across a little brook, up a winding path through a wood all blazoned yellow and red, and put upon lush meadows where the view plunged westward forever across the rich, rolling country. A gaunt, salient youth on horseback led the way, and as we got further and further away from the staff he began to smile, and offered his horse to ride. And he talked, telling of the May days when the Russian troops fraternized with the Germans all along this front.

"The Germans sent spies," he said, "but then, so did our officers. There is always somebody around to betray the people, no matter what nation you belong to. Many times they tried to make us attack our German comrades, but we refused. And they also refused; I know of one regiment where I had many friends, which was condemned for mutiny, reorganized, and twelve men were shot. And still they would not fight the Russians. So they were sent to the Western front. As it was, they finally had to tell us lies to make us advance."

A SOVIET COMMITTEE.

It was half a mile to where the low, wide, thatch covered farm house and its great barn stood baldly on a little rise of ground. Artillery limbers stood parked there, horses were being led to water, there were little cook-fires, and many soldiers. A huge brick stove divided the interior of their belongings heaped in the corners; the other half was bare except for two home-made benches and a rough table, heaped high with papers, reports, pamphlets — among which I noticed Lenine's "Imperialism as a New Stage in Capitalism." Around this sat six men, one of them a non-commissioned officer, the rest privates — the presidium of the Soviet of the Second Lettish Brigade. Without any place to sleep except the hay-loft, without winter clothes or enough to eat, the committee sat permanently, and had been sitting for a month, doing the work the staff should have done.

This is no unsupported assertion on my part. One had only to ask any soldier where he got his food, his clothing — what he did get — who found and assigned his quarters, represented him politically, defended his interests; he would always say, "The Committee." If the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Armies gave an order for the Second Lettish Brigade to attack, or to retreat, not a single man would move without the endorsement of the Committee. This resulted from two fears; one that they would be sent to Petrograd to suppress the Revolution, the other that they would be tricked into an offensive as they were tricked in June.

They welcomed us with great friendliness, wiping off the bench where we were to sit, fetching cigarettes, taking our coats, other soldiers crowded in and stood about the door silently watching.

(To be continued)