Royal United Services Institution. Journal

Publication details, including instructions for
authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rusi19>

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Published online: 11 Sep 2009.

To cite this article: Lieut.-Colonel C. E. de la Poer Beresford p.s.c. (1899) The Trans-Siberian Railway, Royal United Services Institution. Journal, 43:251, 61-66, DOI:
[10.1080/03071849909417610](https://doi.org/10.1080/03071849909417610)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03071849909417610>

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THE TRANS-SIBERIAN RAILWAY.

*By Lieut.-Colonel C. E. de la POER BERESFORD, p.s.c.,
Military Attaché at St. Petersburg.*

HIS Majesty the Emperor Nicholas Alexandrovitch laid the first rail of the Trans-Siberian during his visit to Vladivostock, at the time of his memorable journey to the East, some seven years ago. The projected railway, starting from both ends simultaneously, was to meet at Irkutsk. Subsequent events, with which I am not here concerned, caused a modification of this scheme. The section from the extreme east was finished, as far as Kharbarovka, at the junction of the rivers Ussuri and Amur. It has been in working order for some years, and was used quite lately by Prince Henry of Prussia on his journey to Blagoviechensk. To this town, and beyond it to Albazin, steamers ply in summer up the Amur. They also descend this capricious stream to Nicholaievsk. Settlers from Russia have located themselves along the Ussuri railway, but they do not seem to have been as prosperous as might have been expected; for since 1894 both their numbers and the area of ground under cultivation have sensibly diminished. The railway was to have been continued, avoiding, as far as possible, the dangers of the Amur valley and its terrible inundations, past Chernayeva and Albazin, to Strietinsk. It was actually laid down from Strietinsk to Mitrophanov, but in 1897 a fearful flood carried away the whole line, 300 versts in length, and did damage to the amount of £600,000. The work had to be recommenced, and only 110 versts were relaid by the end of last year. It is unlikely that this line will be continued. A new direction has been imposed by events upon the eastern portion of the great line. Surveys are now in progress with a view to running the iron-horse through Manchuria. Such a line might cross the Russo-Chinese frontier near Aksha, or Abagatouie, north of the Dalai-Nor. Although I cannot state certainly where this railway will pass, yet I know that it is now partially constructed. As a consequence, communications will probably be thus for the present arranged in the Trans-Baikal district. The railway from Chita will be connected with steam-boat traffic at Strietinsk, on the Schilka, or Ibash-China, on the Amur river; and the main line will run from Chita to the frontier station, and probably past Tzizichar, Kirin, and Moukden, with a loop to Vladivostock, to the coast at Port Arthur.

It is more interesting to turn from the line *in posse* to that *in esse*. Trains now run from St. Petersburg to Irkutsk, with two breaks only, at Krasnoyarsk and Zimensk, where the bridges over the Yenesei and Oka

are still unfinished. The bridge over the Ob or Obi river at Ob-Krivoshchekovo, is completed. It is a magnificent structure, which does the greatest credit to the Russian engineer. It towers 80 feet above the river in ordinary times, and 50 feet above its raging waters when in flood. Its length is 900 yards, and it cost £220,000. All the bridges are the same in type, if of iron. They carry a single line, through girder lattice work, over spans varying in length from 100 yards downwards. The piers are of stone. I sent a photograph of one of them to the *British Realm*, to accompany an article of mine which appeared in the August issue of that paper. It might serve as a type of all these Siberian bridges. For the smaller streams the timber, which is so plentiful in Central Siberia, has been utilised. Anyone who knows the clever work of the Russian carpenter can imagine that they are marvels of ingenious construction.

The total distance from St. Petersburg to Irkutsk is about 3,500 miles. From Cheliabinsk, in the province of Orenburg, where the line hooks on to the Samara-Zlatoust line, to Irkutsk is 3,053 versts, or almost exactly 1,910 miles. This distance of 3,500 miles then, with the exception of the gaps at the two rivers mentioned, is actually laid down. Trains now run as far as Ob-Krivoshchekovo without a break. Most luxurious they are, with well-warmed carriages, bath, library, gymnasium, and restaurant. These trains only start twice a month, and the ordinary trains are not so comfortable; but the whole line is as yet in an embryo state, and must not be too severely criticised. The passage of the rivers Yenesei and Oka by boat, for instance, is far from comfortable in cold weather; and the trains at the other side of the bridge at Krasnoyarsk are not equal to that which starts from the capital; yet is a mighty thing to have accomplished this line even so far as Irkutsk. Commencing from the western end the line was worked at in three sections simultaneously. First, from Cheliabinsk to Omsk, a distance of 741 versts; secondly, from Omsk to Krivoshchekovo, 585 versts; and thirdly, from Krivoshchekovo to Irkutsk, the Mid-Siberian line, 1,730 versts. Perhaps it will be better to take these sections *seriatim*, and to endeavour to describe them and the country they cross in detail.

The first section passes through the vast and dreary province of Akmolinsk, traversing the basins of the Ishim and Irtish, those mighty tributaries of the still greater Ob, or, as we say, Obi, river. The Akmolinsk province stretches southward as far as the shores of Lake Balkash, and the confines of Syr-Daria. Of all the dreary, sun-baked, desolate districts of the world, this is the most dreary. Inhabited by nomadic Kirgese its total population is only half a million, which gives a proportion of about 1 per square mile! It contains little but the flocks of the Kirgese, and a few sand-grouse, at which they fly their famous falcons. In its southern extremity lie the vast "Hunger Steppes," whose name sufficiently indicates their character. Woe to the luckless Kirgess whose horse fails him in these desolate regions! He may give himself up as a prey to the sand which has buried a hundred once flourishing towns left in ruins by Tamerlane. Even the water here is salt and

presents difficulties to the engineer. It, or rather the want of it, caused considerable delays in the construction of this section. The tanks in which it is stored are frozen in winter, and to thaw them continual fires must be kept burning. To provide the fuel for this alone will not be easy in this treeless land. It is true that the railway avoids the worst part of this province, and from Petropavlovsk, on the Irtysh, to Omsk, closely follows the old caravan road, from the East to Tiomen and Perm. This portion of the railway is the least cheering, and very unfavourably impresses the traveller. But it is only the *entr'acte*, so to speak, between Europe and Asia; and, after Omsk, the curtain lifts upon a far more smiling picture.

The second section, from Omsk to the Obi river, leaves the great Baraba steppe to the north. The district which it traverses is, as natural in the basins of two such vast streams as the Irtysh and the Obi, well watered. It contains numerous lakes, and is considerably more indented than the monotonous plains of Akmolinsk. At present the population of this country is chiefly composed of fishermen and trappers, but agriculture, it is hoped, will be its future. The train is now in the flourishing province of Tomsk, whose chief town is second only in name to Tobolsk, the capital of the Government; and far superior to it in position, resources, and population. Here the under-features of the distant Altai chain sink slowly into the plain, and from their gentle elevations course down many streams. It is to this district, less hilly than that of Irkutsk, less desert than that of Akmolinsk, that the Russian Government hopes to draw many settlers.¹ During the year 1897-8 no less than 200,000 emigrants have passed eastwards over the Siberian railway. Some of these will be successful, some again are destined neither to succeed nor return; whilst a third portion will find their way back to Russia, aided by the charity of no one knows whom. The most conflicting accounts are in circulation as to the fate of the emigrants from Russia to Siberia. This country is represented by some as a land flowing with milk and honey; by others it is painted in the gloomiest colours. It is pretty certain that the wheat-growing area of this district will be enormously increased by the railway. As the cornfields already existing begin to fail, the steppe and forest-land will be broken up, to smile with golden grain. Once the land in the immediate vicinity of the trunk-line is exhausted, new branch-lines will become necessary to "tap" the country. The communications at present are very defective, and the energy of the Siberian peasant does not promise much improvement in the way of road-making. But that the fertility of this province is no chimera, is proved by the fact that since the first train ran into Irkutsk, some two months ago, more than 3,000 tons of wheat and oats have been carried there by the railway from the Tomsk district. As a consequence, the price of wheat at Irkutsk has fallen from 2 roubles 30 kopecks to 1 rouble 30 kopecks per Russian pood of 36 lbs. avoirdupois. The price of oats, in like manner, has

¹ Up to November, 1898, 179,000 immigrants have this year entered Siberia, of which 2,000 passed *via* Tiomen, the rest by Cheliabinsk.—C. E. D. B.

declined from 1 rouble 80 kopecks to 80 kopecks per pood. For the uninitiated it may be mentioned that 100 kopecks go to the rouble, and the value of a kopeck is almost exactly one farthing.

In view of the proximate necessity of bringing the grain to the consumer, and the consumer to the grain, and of providing against the evils likely to arise from a considerable immigration into a new country productive alike of grain and minerals, the Russian Government is making wide-spreading and complete arrangements. The Ministry of the Interior will have to provide for the colonisation of these vast regions, to augment the number of fairs and markets, to improve the postal service, and to organise a body of police. To the Ministry of Agriculture will fall a still more considerable task. The agricultural wants of the country must be considered, the best manner of developing the rural districts, the instruction of the colonists, many of them ignorant of Nature and her ways; the creation of model farms in various localities; and finally the improvement and development of the much neglected mineral industry. The Ministry of Public Instruction will institute primary and secondary schools, and to various other Government departments will the following improvements be assigned, viz., construction and development of steam-communications on the rivers, reform of the system of taxation, and the general development of credit in the region. Good and charitable souls are already collecting money to build churches, which will serve as centres round which the huts of the peasantry will arise. The latter will thus be provided with that religious care and supervision which is so striking a feature of life in the provinces of European Russia. The Ministry of Ways and Communications is studying the question of the provision of light railways,¹ similar to those which have been so successful in Ireland, with a view to finding an easy market for local products, as otherwise only a small portion of this vast country would derive appreciable benefit from the railway. The existing river steam-boat companies already do much in this way, but their number is not sufficient, and as a rule the rivers are far from the regions richest in mineral wealth. The vast forests which lie far from the line of the Trans-Siberian, must also be drawn upon, not only for smelting purposes in the mining industry, but also to provide fuel for domestic use in European Russia; where, bountiful as Nature has been in this respect, her resources are beginning to show signs of exhaustion. In Western Siberia, the treeless district before mentioned, the price of wood is exorbitant—running to 12 or even 18 roubles the cubic *sazhen*, or double the price current in St. Petersburg. The first light railways will be laid down in the mining districts. One has already been constructed from the station of Soujenko to a private coal-mine. It is thus hoped that coal will be brought to the Trans-Siberian in such quantities as to replace wood, which is at present the only fuel used on the railway; and that a considerable economy in the working expenses of the line will thus be possible.

¹ The rails which have been laid on the permanent-way of the Trans-Siberian have been found too light for safety. They will be replaced by heavier rails, and will themselves serve for branch light lines.—C. E. D. G.

The third section of the line, the Mid-Siberian Railway, from Krivoshechekovo to Irkutsk, only just completed, which the Yenesei and Oka still rush through unspanned, enters a delightful and interesting country. It is scarcely exaggeration to say that a Switzerland here succeeds a Sahara; though the Tomsk province rather resembles the uninteresting though fertile plains of Manitoba, than the African desert. Here we enter the basins of two of the most gigantic of the earth's water-courses, fit to be mentioned in a breath with the Nile or Amazon. I allude to the Yenesei and the Lena, streams thousands of miles long, which, rising in the snows of the mighty mountains that separate Siberia from the vast Central Asian deserts, rush turbulently to the frozen ocean. At Krasnoyarsk—where the Yenesei has only traversed one-fifth of the distance which separates its cradle in the serrated peaks of Munku Sardik, from its grave in the Kara Sea—the bridge is nearly half-a-mile across. It is raised high above the water-level to keep the permanent way secure from the rushing floods which course down from the Sayanisch chain at the melting of the snows. This bridge cannot well be completed until the autumn of 1899, for it is impossible to work in the caissons during the severe winter which here prevails. The upper basin of the Yenesei is a district cut into a thousand valleys by the tributaries of the great river, which score and excavate the country into many valleys, bright with green pastures dotted with magnificent timber, and full of fur and feather. From here come the fox and the sable, whose glistening skins show to such advantage at Lelianoff's or Marten's in St. Petersburg. At Atcheensk, Kansk, and Minnosinsk, all within reasonable distance of Krasnoyarsk, is found the gold which provides the settings for the masterpieces which lie hidden behind Faberjé's jealous screens in the great Morskaia; and the spruce and larch will feed the smelting furnaces or provide struts and supports for the galleries in coal-mines hidden as yet in earth's recesses. The railway crosses no less than six important bridges between Krasnoyarsk and Irkutsk. In this section considerable tracts of marshy country have to be dealt with, and the rapidity of the construction of the line has not allowed sufficient time to form in all places a sufficiently solid foundation for the sleepers. The comfort, not to say safety, of the journey here still leaves much to be desired.

To recapitulate: The Trans-Siberian joins the European system at Cheliabinsk, which is 2,060 versts from Moscow. It crosses the whole of West Siberia. It was surveyed and partially constructed, through East Siberia as far as Vladivostock. The total length was to have been 7,112 versts. The direction of the portion of Chita eastwards has been changed, and the Ussuri line will probably not, for the present, at all events, be extended. From Cheliabinsk to Ob-Krivoshechekovo the line is called the West Siberian Railway. Trains start from the former place every Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday, and are supposed to arrive at Ob in sixty-one hours. (?) There are buffets where tea, coffee, wine, beer, and *vodka*, beside hot dishes *à la carte*, are sold, at Cheliabinsk, Choumika, Koorgan, Makouchino, Petropavlovsk, Issil-kool, Omsk, Tatarskaia, Kainsk, Tschoolim, and Krivoshechekovo. The charge for luggage is

about six kopecks per pood (36 lbs.). From Krivoschekovo to Irkutsk, the Central Siberian line is not so completely organised, but there are buffets at Bolotnaya, Taiga, Mariensk, Bogotol, Atcheensk, Krasnoyarsk; and food can be obtained in a roughish way at Nishni-Udinsk and Zimensk. Beyond Irkutsk the only line actually working is the Ussuri line, on which between Vladivostock and Mir Amurski there are refreshment rooms at Nadeshneskaya, Nikolskoe Spasskaya and Ussuri, besides at the termini.

Much might be written about the existing modes of communication in Yakouts and the East Siberian districts; of the dogs and the reindeer of the Yakouts and the Toungus; but it is not pertinent to the matter in hand. The question as to the construction of the existing line is more to the point. It is true that in Russia the public is content with a railway service which would not at all satisfy the requirements of Western Europe. It would be impossible to run heavy and continuous trains over the existing Russian lines. And far less would such traffic be possible on the Trans-Siberian line as at present constructed. The rails must be heavier, the sleepers made of better wood than soft fir; and they must be securely ballasted. It will probably be necessary to re-lay a great portion of this line, but doubtless the rails on hand at present would be useful enough for the construction of light railways, radiating from the Great Trunk line. There can be no doubt that great benefits will result to civilisation from the construction of the Trans-Siberian. As to the strategic value of the railway, it will no doubt be considerable. Russia, naturally enough, wanted to join her port or ports on the Pacific with the heart of the Empire. But to imagine that the movement of large bodies of troops for so vast a distance, by a single line of rail is an easy matter, or indeed any but a matter of huge difficulty, is to show a very imperfect knowledge of the history of the movement of troops by this means. British energy should rather be directed to obtaining orders for the iron rails, which will have to be purchased somewhere, in all probability very soon; than to cavilling and carping at a railway extension, which, after all, Britons can have no right to object to; and the completion of which will be hailed with delight by all whose motto is *Aperire terram gentibus*.